



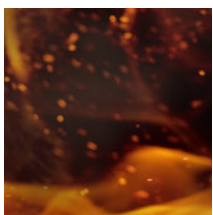
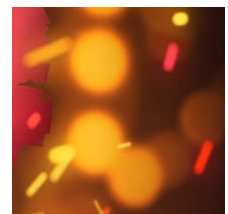
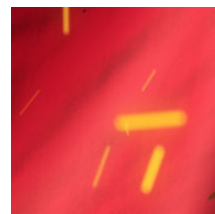
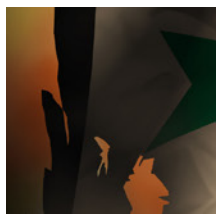
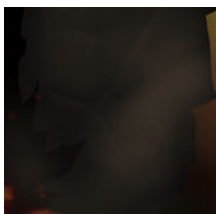
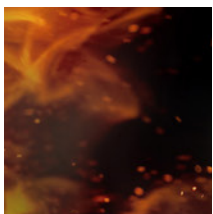
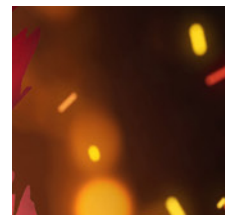
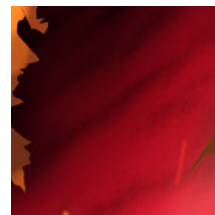
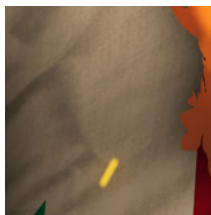
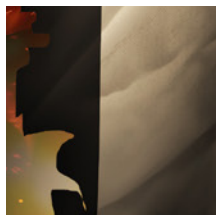
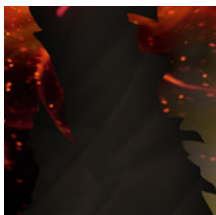
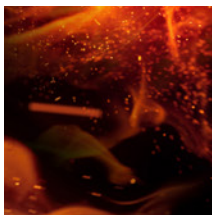
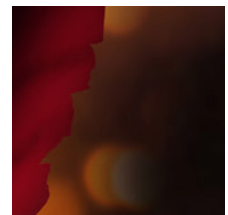
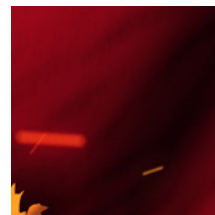
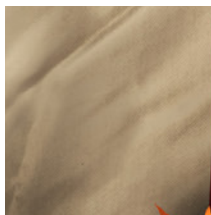
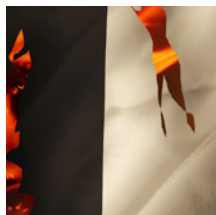
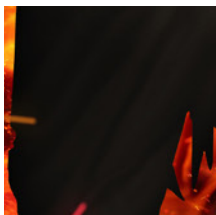
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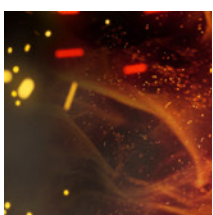
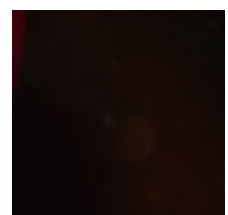
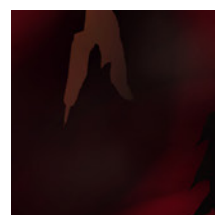
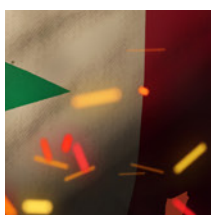
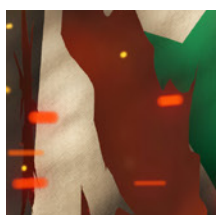
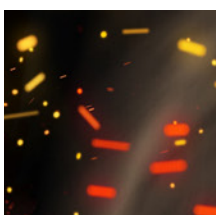
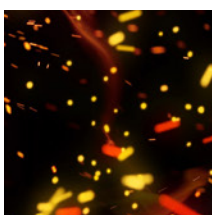
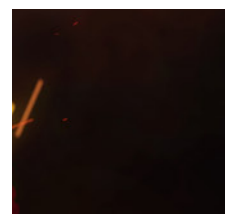
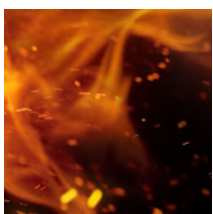
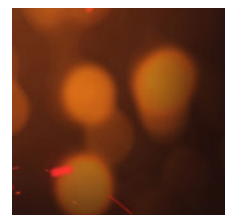


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THE SYRIAN IMBROGLIO: INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL STRATEGIES



Edited by
Ioannis Galariotis and Kostas Ifantis

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THE SYRIAN IMBROGLIO: INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL STRATEGIES

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and Kostas Ifantis

INDEX

Abstract	1
Keywords	1
Introduction - Ioannis Galariotis and Kostas Ifantis	2
On a Power Vacuum and Retreat: The Obama Doctrine in the Middle East and the Syrian Crisis - Kostas Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis	4
Sticking with your ally - Explaining Russia's support for the Assad regime - Hanna Notte	11
Saudi Arabia's Syria policy - Neil Quilliam	20
Turkey's foreign policy towards Syria, 2011-2017 - Kostas Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis	27
Hezbollah's Lebanese strategy in the Syrian conflict - Marina Calculli	36
Conclusions - Ioannis Galariotis and Kostas Ifantis	45
Contributors	47

ABSTRACT

The civil war in Syria has international repercussions due to the ongoing multi-sided character of the sectarian conflict and the involvement of all major global and regional powers. Despite the unending violence and the perpetuation of the Syrian inferno, little scholarly attention has been given to the intervention of the international community to mediate the war. The basic goal of this ebook is to fill this gap, at least partially, by examining the involvement of major international and regional actors in the Syrian crisis. Toward this end, the strategies and interventions of five states are examined: United States of America, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Lebanon.

KEYWORDS

Syrian civil war, international strategies, US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon



INTRODUCTION

“In the Syrian civil war, the choice is often between bad and worse.”¹

Ioannis Galariotis and Kostas Ifantis

The Middle East has been in a state of collapse since the Arab Spring. A series of critical, complex and interrelated failures in security have resulted in chaos and bloodshed unprecedented even for a region with such a troubled past. While the demand for intervention has been high, the response has been very low. Almost a decade and a half after the United States (US) military campaign in Iraq, and six years after the celebrated Arab Spring, the evolving situation is met by a profound lack of appetite for a strategic response and regional engagement.²

Without doubt, the most violent, bloody and alarming case is that of the conflict in Syria. It is surprising that a country with close political, economic and diplomatic ties in the international system of states plunged into civil war. Until 2011, Syria, under the presidency of Bashar al-Assad, had been trying to reorganize its economy and dilute the old system of crony capitalism that had governed the country for the previous thirty years. Yet, the seeds of an upcoming catastrophe were evident long before the conflict broke out in March 2011. Bashar al-Assad failed in his attempt to progress on key fronts: “fighting corruption and starting moves towards freedom, democracy, the rule of law and the dismantling of the security state”.³ Failure in these vital areas was enough to spread the epidemic of civil war.

From the beginning of the conflict, it was evident that this crisis was too great to escape the interest and involvement of the international community. The

ongoing sectarian conflict has resulted in approximately 470,000 deaths, 6.1 million internally displaced people, and 4.8 million seeking refuge abroad.⁴ Despite the unending violence and the perpetuation of the Syrian inferno, little scholarly attention has been given to the intervention of the international community to mediate the war. The aim of this collection of contributions from scholars who have expertise in Middle Eastern studies is to fill this gap, at least partially, by examining the involvement of major international and regional actors in the Syrian crisis. Toward this end, the strategies and interventions of five states are examined: US, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Lebanon.

In the next chapter, Kostas Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis shed light on the US strategy in Syria and in the wider Middle East. They explain the failures of Obama’s vision to find a viable solution for the settlement of the conflict. Hanna Notte then examines Russia’s intervention in the Syrian civil war and how its military intervention, from September 2015, has been of revolutionary significance. In the third chapter, Neil Quilliam gives a sober evaluation of Saudi Arabia’s attitude towards Syria since the Arab Spring protests in 2011; he explains Saudi Arabia’s policy change from being a follower of Bashar al-Assad to an ally of armed opposition groups aiming to overthrow the Syrian regime. In the contribution that follows, Kostas Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis analyze Erdogan’s mistaken calculations, which led to Turkey’s unsuccessful engagement in the Syrian conflict from 2011 onwards. Last but not least, Marina Calculli assesses the intervention of Hezbollah in the Syrian war; she provides new evidence to demonstrate that, contrary to received wisdom, Hezbollah is not going regional but is actually becoming politically stronger in Lebanon not just in spite of its intervention in Syria, but precisely through it.⁵

4 Human Rights Watch, ‘Syria: Events of 2016’, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2017/country-chapters/syria>.

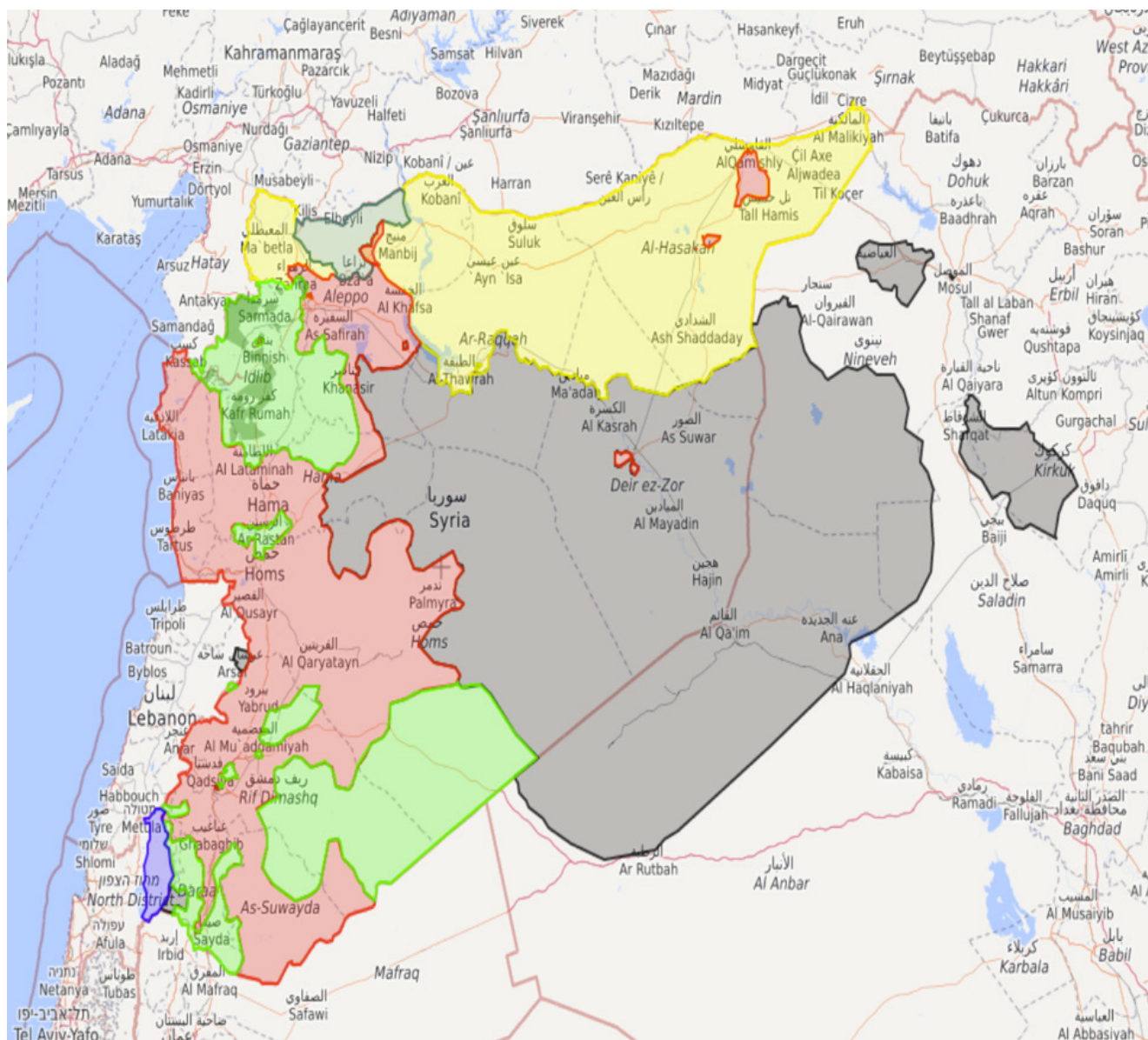
5 The book stems from an international workshop held at the European University Institute in Florence on 16th of June 2016. The workshop brought together all the contributors in this e-book. Ioannis Galariotis would like to thank Professor Ulrich Krotz and the ‘Europe in the World’ research group for their generous funding of this workshop. He would like also to thank the Max Weber Programme for its continuous support until the finalization of this publication.

1 Cockburn, P. (2017) “Who Supplies the News”, London Review of Books, vol.39, no.3, pp.7-9 (2 February 2017).

2 See the collections of articles from The Independent: Fisk, R., Cockburn, P. and K.Sengupta (2016) *History as It Happened: Syria: Descent into the Abyss* (Miami: Mango Media, The Independent).

3 McHugo, J. (2015) *Syria: A Recent History* (London: Saqi Books), p. 219.





Source: www.syria.liveuamap.com (accessed 4 June 2017)

ON A POWER VACUUM AND RETREAT: THE OBAMA DOCTRINE IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE SYRIAN CRISIS

Kostas Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis

Introduction

This paper argues that the United States (US) – the principal security actor in the Middle East – has demonstrated strategic anxiety bordering on inertia. Although President Obama did outline something akin to a Doctrine for American security engagement in the world, this has hardly been a proactive strategy designed to deal with the regional security collapse. It has been an approach profoundly lacking in a clear vision or a willingness to take on the regional security challenges. The result has been that Washington has been left without trusted partners or allies to work with. In the following pages, we first discuss the old security regime for the region and its transformation following the so-called Arab Spring; we go on to analyze US foreign policy priorities and preferences under Barack Obama, as well as its responses to the security issues in the region.

The old anchors are no more...

The Middle East and the Eastern Mediterranean have always been sensitive regions of strategic dynamics for diverse state as well as sub-state actors. The US has been molding a broad political and security strategy in the region since the end of the Second World War to maintain and safeguard the two-major regional triangular relationships: US-Turkey-Israel and US-Egypt-Israel.¹ In the case of the former, a strategic turn

took place when Turkey and Israel signed a military cooperation agreement in 1996. That agreement was perceived as a fundamental US-Turkish strategic bond, featuring the importance of Turkey as Israel's partner in the Middle East. It also highlighted the strong support from the powerful Jewish lobby in Washington on issues that were important to Turkey, such as confronting the impact of the Armenian lobby and promoting in Congress Turkey's demands for advanced military hardware.² In the case of the latter, confronting Iran's activism and combating terrorism are among the most vital interests shared by the three powers, the US, Egypt and Israel. These strategic priorities have defined US interests over the years, sustaining a stable regional balance of power and safeguarding the energy supply of the West.³

Since the late 2000s, however, new political forces have come to the fore, eager to offer a substantial challenge to the strategic topography that the US had been striving to shape. The social turmoil of the Arab Spring was an attempt to establish a new regional order that was ready to trigger the relative predictability of the political preferences of the previous two decades. The setting in which the two triangular relationships had functioned was disrupted and the US found itself in profound difficulty because of the inability and incompetence of traditional partners to maintain the 'old' regional order. Political disorder became the norm and not the exception to the rule.⁴ For instance, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict erupted once again, with episodes of violence in November 2012 and July 2014 on the Gaza Strip.

Turkey has always been an anchor for the strategic objectives of the US in the wider Middle East region. During the Cold War, it was a critical partner of the US⁵; in this respect, it was also significant in the promotion of US regional engagement policies in the Middle

1 Alterman, Jon and Malka, Haim (2012) "Shifting Eastern Mediterranean Geometry", *The Washington Quarterly*, Vol.35 No.3, p. 111.

2 Aydin, Mustafa (2009) "Reconstructing Turkish-American Relations: Divergences versus Convergences", *New Perspectives on Turkey*, Vol.40, pp.134-135.

3 Ibid., p. 114.

4 "The Gaza Crisis: Will the ceasefire lead to peace?", *The Economist*, 24 November 2012.

5 Friedman, George "Turkey's Strategy", *Geopolitical Weekly*, 17 April 2012, http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/turkeys_strategy/, p.2.

East⁶. However, over the last two decades US-Turkish relations have been riven by uncertainty, beginning with the end of the Cold War when Turkey became free of its fear of Russia. This outcome had significant consequences for the US-Turkish relationship: Turkey was free to sketch its own approach to policy, without US strategic dependence.⁷ A first sign of this new approach was its unwillingness to follow US plans in the 2003 military campaign against Iraq.⁸

The leaders of AKP place the Islamic world very high on the agenda of Turkey's foreign policy. Davutoglu's doctrine was that Turkey must reestablish its historic and cultural connections with the Middle East, North Africa and Eurasia.⁹ In the case of the Middle East, this major foreign policy shift has been described as a 'neo-Ottoman' platform,¹⁰ indicating that Turkey's Ottoman heritage gives it some sort of historical responsibility toward the Middle East and a sense of exceptionalism in the region¹¹. Since AKP's advent to power in 2002, the nature of this exceptionalism has expressed another dimension: it has been strongly based on ethical concerns, a quest for a just and peaceful international political order and respect for international law, supporting human rights both at home and abroad.¹²

Within such a changing foreign policy context, Washington and the West should not have expected

that Turkey's support was a given.¹³ Rather, a quest for more autonomy of action should have been expected on the part of Turkey.¹⁴ The uncertain future of Turkey's democracy and the formulation of an assertive and diverse foreign policy under Erdogan have considerable implications for US interests in the Middle East.¹⁵ In this equation, Iran's growing importance for Ankara, both as a source of natural gas and a new market for Turkey's assertive export sector, cannot be ignored. In 2012, when Ankara refused to support economic sanctions against Tehran and identified Israel as part of a nuclear Iran problem, it seemed to keep its distance from the assessment of the Iranian nuclear program that was dominant in the West.¹⁶ In Syria, when the Turkish government approved military action¹⁷ in 2012, it added further complexity to its relations with Washington by abandoning its status as a trusted regional ally.¹⁸

Considering the above, both the US and Turkey, more than ever, have formed differing perceptions and diverging views over key policy choices and issues for the future security of the Middle East. Although Washington recognizes Turkey's essential role in the region and its value in stabilizing US relations with the Muslim world¹⁹, the relationship has become more complex and sensitive as Turkey has distanced itself from traditional partners, such as Israel, and has pursued a more hegemonic role as an aspiring regional leader for the region. But regardless of the troubled US-Turkish relationship, other developments have added to the complexity of the situation in the Middle East.

6 Gerger, Fawaz A. (2013) "The Obama Approach to the Middle East: The End of America's Moment?", *International Affairs*, Vol.89 No.2, p. 317 and Global Relations Forum (GRF), *Turkey-USA Partnership at the Dawn of a New Century*, Task Force Report (2011), Istanbul, p.19.

7 Friedman, *op.cit.*, p. 2.

8 Park, Bill (2003) "Strategic location, political dislocation: Turkey, The United States, and Northern Iraq", *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, Vol.7 No.2, p. 9.

9 Murinson, Alexander (2006) "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol.42 No.6, pp. 945-64.

10 Fradkin, Hillel and Libby, Lewis (2013) "Erdogan's Grand Vision: Rise and Decline", *World Affairs Journal*, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/print/63552>.

11 Han, Ahmet K. (2013) "Paradise Lost: A neoclassical Realist Analysis of Turkish Foreign Policy and the Case of Turkish-Syrian Relations", in Raymond Hinnebusch and Ozlem Tur (eds) *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity* (Farnham: Ashgate).

12 Aral, Berdal (2015) "Law, Ethics, and Justice in the Emerging International Order: A Study of Turkish Diplomacy under the AK Party Government (2002-2014)", *Insight Turkey*, vol.17, no.3, p. 189.

13 Gerger, *op.cit.*, p. 317.

14 Walberg, Eric (2011) "Turkey-Israel Relations and the Middle East Geopolitical Chessboard. Turkey redraws Sykes-Picot", Global Research, 30 November 2011, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/turkey-israel-relations-and-the-middle-east-geopolitical-chessboard/26867>.

15 Robins, Philip (2013) "Turkey's "double gravity" predicament: The foreign policy of a newly activist power", *International Affairs*, Vol.89 No.2, pp. 381-397.

16 Reynolds, Michael (2012) *Echoes of Empire: Turkey's Crisis of Kemalism and the Search for an Alternative Foreign Policy*, The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, Analysis Paper No 26, June 2012 and Fradkin and Libby, *op.cit.*

17 "Turkey's Parliament Approves Further Military Action Against Syria", *The New York Times*, October 4, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

18 Zeyrek, Deniz "Turkey's Syria Policy: Success or Bankruptcy?", *Radikal*, 26 May 2013.

19 Gerger, *op.cit.*, p.316.

Israel's neighbors have become more hostile. Once it could count on Egypt to contain Hamas, but Egypt's domestic situation has undermined its regional status. In Lebanon, the Hezbollah party-cum-militia holds sway. Jordan's King Abdullah has found himself under increasing political and economic pressure. Syria's civil war has shattered the calm on the border with Israel; the war's outcome is critical to the regional status quo.²⁰ In Iraq and Syria, the jihadist paramilitaries of ISIS have established a presence that threatens to redraw the regional map in ways hard to imagine.

On the Arab Spring

The expression Arab Spring has been used to designate what appeared to be widespread uprisings against authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria.²¹ The label has proved to reflect wishful thinking rather than reality. The momentum of reform proved too weak and, although the degree of social mobilization was seen as unprecedented, the dynamics of democratization did not endure; the political and social prospect for change proved more of a chimera. Democratic advances proved fragile; democratic reform was, in most cases, suppressed with violence.²² Most of the actors involved have still to agree on even the fundamentals and they appear more unanimous about what they are against, which confirms the region's historic lack of consensus on almost everything political. Distrust between different actors, both between and within states, is on the rise, making politics and identity even more fractured and polarized.²³ The upheavals, whatever their initial inspiration, rapidly transformed into a regional sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shiite Muslims that has since been threatening to envelop the entire Middle East. In Syria, the conflict became a regional sectarian war where the divide between Sunnis and Shiites manifested itself with a vengeance.²⁴

Muasher has identified three key dynamics at play.²⁵ The

20 "Old battles, new Middle East", *The Economist*, November 24, 2012.

21 Dunsmore, Barrie (2013) "Mideast Arab Spring morphs into sectarian conflicts", June 9, <http://vtdigger.org/2013/06/09/dunsmore-mideast-arab-spring-morphs-into-sectarian-conflicts/#sthash.5s4KQU5K.dpuf>.

22 Youngs, R. (2014), *From Transformation to Mediation: The Arab Spring Reframed*, Carnegie Europe, p. 4.

23 Ibid., p. 5.

24 Dunsmore, Barrie *op.cit.*

25 Muasher, Marwan (2013) "Year Four of the Arab

first has been the metamorphosis of Islamic religious groups from opposition forces into political formations to be reckoned with in most countries experiencing political upheavals (i.e. Tunisia, Morocco, Libya and Yemen as well as in Egypt). The second factor stems from the two battles within political Islam: on the one hand between the offshoot movements of the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups and the other between Sunni and Shia. According to Muasher, "the first might determine to a great extent the future course of political Islam—whether it will be inclusionary or fundamentalist, peaceful or radical, reactionary or modern, or less clearly delineated."²⁶ The second struggle is also important because the tension between Sunnis and Shia has risen to such worrisome heights throughout the region (Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Syria). The last dynamic determining a war-prone state of play is the secular forces. They are not ready to accept the rise of Islamic regimes; only as far as democracy means they remain in power and their elite standing is not challenged.²⁷

The process of the authoritarian bargain developed in the post-Arab Spring Middle East reveals that casting aside the old secular autocrats did not necessarily mean that these states were set on a path to democracy.²⁸ Rather, the process has led to more fragmentation and war. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, one more failure to reach a breakthrough in 2014, following the latest high-profile US effort, has demonstrated more than anything that traditional approaches are not working. Although the monarchies of the Arab world have, on the whole, not suffered this turmoil, they are by no means immune to the instability. In Syria, regional and internal dynamics have shifted in al-Assad's favor as international concern over the growing role of Islamic fundamentalist groups in the opposition grew.²⁹

Awakening", Carnegie Endowment for 'International Peace, December 12, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/12/12/year-four-of-arab-awakening-pub-53905>.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Dilek, Oguz (2015) "The Demise of the Authoritarian Bargain in the Arab Middle East", *Insight Turkey*, vol.17, no.3, p. 100.

29 Nasr, Vali (2013) "Back to the Future for US Policy In Egypt and Syria", 31 July 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/back-to-future-for-us-policy-in-egypt-and-syria.html?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=7893#ixzz2bxmjcGcG.

The Obama Doctrine

Looking back to the Bush years (2001-2009), US foreign policy strategy was shaped by the neoconservative mantra that a militaristic and regime-change foreign policy could transform the Middle East. By the end of his second term, although his policy had been contradictory and ambivalent, President Obama managed to make considerable changes despite domestic challenges and limited resources. The basic tenet of his foreign policy strategy was based on a belief-system situated within an “amalgam of pragmatism and Niebuhrian realism”³⁰: namely, the promotion of international institutions and collective action, the co-existence of war and peace, universal values and practical geopolitics. Obama, in practice, strived to diminish the poor reputation US foreign policy had made for itself under the Bush administration.³¹ This was challenging, given the opposition that stemmed from the Republican Congress and that dealing with the global downturn both at home and abroad was imperative. The cumulative cost of the American response to 9/11 was estimated to at least 3.3 trillion dollars by 2011.³²

This foreign policy shift was built on a rethinking of multilateralism, by a leadership aware of the rise of countries like China, India and Brazil. For Obama, it was obvious that US power was limited in a new interdependent and ‘globalized’ international system and, for this reason, he chose to promote a cooperative strategy with both allies and non-allies to combat transnational threats.³³ When he was reelected in November 2012, Obama sketched the major lines of his new foreign policy agenda: Europe and the Middle East were not a high priority; instead he turned the focus

towards the Asia-Pacific region.³⁴ This new priority was reflected in the Defense Department’s January 2012 “strategic guidance” document, which stated that, “US economic and security interests are inextricably linked to developments in the arc extending from the Western Pacific and East Asia into the Indian Ocean region and South Asia.”³⁵ Obama worked hard to end the military presence of the US in the Muslim world and relocate US visibility towards the Asia-Pacific region. The US troop presence in Afghanistan had been scheduled to be reduced at the end of 2014; Obama sought to keep a small number of US troops in Afghanistan beyond 2014 to train Afghan security forces and conduct counterterrorism missions.³⁶

Despite this US strategic change in world affairs, the Middle East region is not one that should be disregarded. Ongoing conflicts and sectarian quagmires, such as those in Syria and Iraq, are striking reminders that the US cannot afford to ignore in its grand strategy around the world. However, from 2001 onwards, the US has followed a foreign policy path that proved to be immensely costly in blood and money. Coupled with the financial crisis in the summer of 2007, Obama’s world vision was substantially diminished. The result was a foreign policy setting that was insolvent and costly. Initially, Obama decreased to zero the US forces in Iraq, believing this was an expensive, unending mission. He also sought to minimize any cost in Afghanistan, maintaining some forces to the fight on counterterrorism, which he embraced with ferocity in Pakistan and Yemen. The Taliban resurgence, however, forced Washington to renege on Obama’s pledge to withdraw all US forces by the end of his term in January 2017. In Syria, from the start, Obama maintained that the US could best protect its interests by staying out of the conflict as much as possible. For Obama, the danger to the US posed by the Assad regime did not warrant

30 Milne, David (2012) ‘Pragmatism or what? The future of US foreign policy’, *International Affairs*, Vol.88 No.5, p. 939

31 Zakaria, Fareed, “The Strategist”, *Time*, January 30, 2012, p. 16.

32 Sanger, David E. (2012) *Confront and Conceal: Obama’s secret wars and surprising use of American power* (New York: Crown), p. 418.

33 Jones, Bruce (2009) “The Coming Clash? Europe and the US Multilateralism under Obama”, in Vasconcelos, A. and Zaborowski, M. (eds) *The Obama Moment: European and American Perspectives*, Paris, EU Institute for Security Studies, p. 69 and Martin Indyk, Kenneth Liebethal and O’Hanlon, Michael E. (2012) “Scoring Obama’s Foreign Policy: A progressive Pragmatist Tries to Bend History”, *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2012.

34 Steplak, Amir and Whitlark, Rachel (2012) “The Battle over America’s Foreign Policy Doctrine”, *Survival*, Vol.54 No.5, p.47 and Gerger, 2013, op. cit., p. 300.

35 “Sustaining US Global Leadership: Priorities for 21st Century Defense”, http://www.defense.gov/news/Defense_Strategic_Guidance.pdf.

36 Pace, Julie, “Obama Surprises Troops in Afghanistan”, 25 May 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/05/25/obama-surprises-troops_n_5389274.html.

direct military intervention.³⁷ This position was been subjected to vociferous criticisms, even within his own administration.³⁸

According to Kenneth Pollack,³⁹ the US disengagement from Iraq was the most significant factor leading to the return of anarchy both there and in the region as a whole. It forced regional actors to interact without the context of the stabilizing security expectations the US presence had been providing for years. It elevated security dilemmas without the restraining effect of US power. Insecurity resulted in aggressive behavior and the reawakening of old power struggles between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The Saudis accelerated their involvement in Syria, as well as directly intervening in Yemen's civil war against the Houthi minority, which they recognize as an Iranian proxy. For Pollack, Obama focused on addressing the threat of instability by containing the spillover rather than by addressing the symptoms, a rather weak response which in the end led to spillover from Syria into Iraq; domestic instability in Turkey, in Jordan and Lebanon then followed. The turmoil in Libya threatens Egypt, Mali and Tunisia, while civil wars across the region have turned into proxy wars between Iran on the one side and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states on the other.⁴⁰

As far as Iran is concerned, while Tehran had for years preferred to flex its muscles in a covert way, working at arm's length with Hezbollah and Hamas as proxies, chaos in Iraq, Syria, Yemen and the rise of ISIS changed that posture.⁴¹ In Iraq, Iran is responsible for approximately 100,000 Iraqi fighters mobilized by Iraqi

Shia clerics. In Yemen, a Shiite movement overthrew the Yemeni President with the help of Iranian arms and money. In Syria, Iran aids the regime by arming and managing a fusion of paramilitary groups that include Hezbollah fighters and Shia militias from Iraq and Afghanistan known as Jaysh al-Shabi (the People's Army).⁴² By contrast, Saudi Arabia regards "the Levant as ground zero in its struggle with Iran".⁴³ The anti-Assad revolution in 2011 was seen in Riyadh as a geostrategic opportunity to alter the regional balance in Saudi Arabia's favor. It was perceived as a chance to weaken Iran and at the same time to neutralize all al-Qaeda elements in Syria.⁴⁴ Beyond the sectarian nature of the Iran-Saudi struggle, in Syria Riyadh strives for an unchanging Sunni authoritarian regime that will be an ordinary partner and will render obsolete the old Iran-Hamas-Hezbollah axis.⁴⁵

The criticisms lodged against Obama are, however, partially flawed and miss out on some important points. The argument that the Obama administration frittered away the victory in Iraq and that the withdrawal of American combat troops is responsible for the ISIS onslaught leaves much to be desired. As Christopher Layne has pointed out, it was the March 2003 invasion and consequent occupation of Iraq that created the conditions for the emergence of ISIS. It was the—not unforeseen—unwillingness of the Iraqi Sunnis to accept their loss of political power to a Shia regime in Baghdad that laid the ground for Sunni militancy and insurgency. Moreover, it was the terms of the 2008 status of forces agreement negotiated by the Bush administration that had provided for the 2011 withdrawal. Furthermore, while Obama had come to terms with the necessity to keep at least a residual American force in Iraq for several years, the then

37 Goldberg, Jeffrey "The Obama Doctrine", *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

38 Former US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford acknowledged that he resigned because he was no longer in a position where he felt he could defend American policy. He added that it was widely known that the State Department thought the US needed to give much more help to the Syrian opposition. Dunne, Michele "The Costs of US Restraint in Syria", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 9 June 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/costs-of-US-restraint-in-syria-pub-55827>.

39 Pollack, Kenneth M. (2016) "Fight or Flight: America's choice in the Middle East", *Foreign Affairs*, vol.95, no.2, p. 66.

40 Ibid., p. 67.

41 Spindle, Bill "Iran Flexes New Clout Beyond its Borders", *The Wall Street Journal*, 6-8 March 2016.

42 Ibid.

43 Wehrey, Frederic and Sadjadpour, K. "Elusive Equilibrium: America, Iran, and Saudi Arabia in a Changing Middle East", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, May 22, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/22/elusive-equilibrium-america-iran-and-saudi-arabia-in-changing-middle-east-pub-55641>.

44 Ibid.

45 Wehrey, Frederic "Gulf Calculations in the Syrian Conflict", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, June 9, 2014, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/06/09/gulf-calculations-in-syrian-conflict-pub-55865>.

Maliki regime refused to accept it.⁴⁶

One could detect that the US strategy has been less than coherent in the Middle East. It is relatively easy to set objectives but it is extremely hard to decide on priorities and actions. Certainly, the US under Obama wanted to see an end to the humanitarian disaster in Syria and Iraq. It wanted Assad out of office. It doesn't want al Qaeda-backed rebels as part of his replacement.⁴⁷ It wanted to prevent an expanded conflict, which could be damaging to allies such as Turkey, Jordan and Israel. It doesn't want to see Iran rising as the dominant actor in the region. It does not want a confrontation with Russia and in fact needs Russian cooperation to avoid a wider war. It is deeply important to understand that not all of these goals are achievable, because some of them are mutually exclusive. For instance, avoiding a confrontation with Russia and getting its cooperation to find a diplomatic solution, probably cannot be achieved if Washington insists that this is dependent on Assad quitting Syria.⁴⁸

Faced with such strategic dilemmas, Obama did resist calls to step-up US military engagement in Syria and rejected the escalation of American involvement against ISIS by refusing to deploy ground forces.⁴⁹ ISIS' seizure of territory in Iraq and Syria in summer 2014 propelled US foreign and security policy debates to center stage again. It also brought to the fore the linkages between the situation in both countries. Again, strong voices in Washington started calling for a more muscular approach and a stepping up of American military engagement, pointing at Obama's previous moderation as the main reason for the region's problems and describing the menace posed by ISIS as an existential

threat to the US.⁵⁰ Again, Obama resisted these calls. He further stood his ground when, following Russia's intervention, "the numerous residual Cold Warriors"⁵¹ began beating the war drums in Washington. American forces were confined to training and intelligence and logistic support to the Iraqis, while using air power to strike ISIS.⁵²

For Layne, a major mistake was Obama's declaration that Assad had to "go".⁵³ This ignored the reality that US choices in the Middle East are between "awful and worse", as the Egyptian case had made very clear where the vacuum created by Mubarak's ousting was filled by radical Islamists, which none in the rest of the Middle East could live with (with the exception of Turkey's AKP).⁵⁴ Moreover, by drawing a red line, he raised the expectations of the anti-Assad forces that the US would eventually intervene on their behalf, thereby causing an intensification of the fighting.⁵⁵ It is worth noting that the 2014 "red line" came after a critical juncture in August 2013 when a chemical weapons attack killed more than 1,400 Syrians.⁵⁶ Although the White House was quick to signal a determination to proceed with air strikes, Obama's final decision to defer to Congress on whether to retaliate made clear he was not willing to sanction a military intervention under any circumstances; he was prepared to finally break with what he called the "Washington playbook" of militarized foreign policy responses.⁵⁷

46 Layne, Christopher (2015) "Obama's Missed Opportunity to Pivot away from the Middle East", *Insight Turkey*, vol.17, no.3, p. 15.

47 Stevenson has noted that from mid-2012, the US has been very hesitant to supply the Syrian opposition, out of fear that jihadists would acquire dangerous weapons. For the US Pentagon, jihadist infiltration of Syria in general and armed anti-Assad groups in particular pose the risk of a Sunni regime heavily reliant or even controlled by al-Qaeda and other affiliates. See Stevenson, Jonathan (2014) "The Syrian Tragedy and Precedent", *Survival*, vol.56, no.3, p. 123.

48 Ibid. See, also Layne 2015; Wehrey 2014 and Goldberg 2016.

49 Layne 2015, p. 12.

50 Among them, then Secretaries of State and Defence John Kerry and Chuck Hagel. Layne 2015, p. 12.

51 Ibid., p. 16.

52 Ibid., p. 16.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Layne 2015 and Stevenson 2014.

56 Stevenson 2014.

57 According to Dunne, "the president's reluctance to use military force in a preemptive way certainly played a major role in this decision; he was also, perhaps, hesitant to antagonize Iran on the cusp of what seemed to be promising talks on the country's nuclear program", Dunne, 2014, op. cit. According to Obama himself: "I'm very proud of this moment. The overwhelming weight of conventional wisdom and the machinery of our national-security apparatus had gone fairly far. The perception was that my credibility was at stake, that America's credibility was at stake. And so for me to press the pause button at that moment, I knew, would cost me politically. And the fact that I was able to pull back from the immediate pressures and think through in my own mind what was in America's interest, not only with respect

A diplomatic solution was found, with Russia as a supporter, based on the idea of the eventual removal of many chemical weapons. However, the second Geneva peace conference in January 2014 was not successful.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, during the spring 2014, the Assad regime regain military control due to the strong support of Iran and Hezbollah. Coupled with that, Russia's military involvement further supported the existing regime; Obama had no other option but to seek a cooperative behavior with Russia and, consequently, to accommodate Putin's interests and preferences in the Middle East.

Obama's 2014 call for Assad to go is a very large obstacle to a political settlement.⁵⁹ It is more than certain that the Assad regime will fight to the end, while Russia and Iran will support it even more.⁶⁰ In this respect, US policy has been severely trapped: on the one hand, a more decisive American action is not definite that it will win the war against the rebels; on the other hand, the American retreat has resulted to the empowerment of Assad, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah, while the opposition and its allies (including the US) are less powerful to determine the state of the conflict.

Conclusion

During the Obama years, most crises in the Middle East were faced with fear and unwillingness, and without committing US resources. The US strategy was determined on a case-by-case basis without much ideological preference or bias.⁶¹ One thing was certain: the US revealed less willingness to make an impact on the course of events. Could it have performed better? On balance, a more consistent US policy could have produced better results, provided consistency was possible, given the monumentally conflicting interests and preferences of regional sectarian state and non-state rulers and political power struggles unleashed by the upheavals in 2011. American influence and the willingness to deploy hard military power had been limited in most cases. There has been a strategic failure to: contain parochial regional antagonism, civil war and jihadist insurgencies; to achieve a breakthrough

to Syria but also with respect to our democracy, was as tough a decision as I've made – and I believe ultimately it was the right decision to make", Goldberg 2016, op. cit.

58 Dunne 2014.

59 Layne 2015.

60 Ibid., pp. 16-17.

61 Milne, 2012, op. cit., pp. 941-942.

in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; to convince a hostile Congress of the imperative of the breakthrough in the Iran nuclear programme; to deal with a revisionist Turkey, with a resurging Russia and with an Egypt swinging from autocracy, to democracy, to political Islam, and back to autocracy within a few months.⁶²

Having to deal with all of the above at the same time, and to go beyond reacting to powerful crosscutting currents over a war-torn region, however, is beyond any strategy that can be devised in a meaningful way. Obama was left with one fundamental strategic pillar: to keep the US out of another irrational military engagement in Syria at a time when US economy was being eroded. Choosing not to fight a war does less damage to US credibility and international standing than always reaching first for a military response. For Obama there was no credibility in "dropping bombs on someone to prove you are willing to drop bombs on someone".⁶³ He had shown that he would not hesitate to use military force in defense of America's direct interests, such as in the bin Laden raid or the drone strikes in Afghanistan and Pakistan, but he would not use it when the risks of casualties are high and where those interests are less than critical.⁶⁴ Iraq and Afghanistan, for a President who as a Senator opposed the campaigns, served as a constant reminder that, while it is hard for the US to maintain the international order, it is even harder to impose it in the arcane fault lines of the Middle East and Syria.

62 Dunne 2014; Layne 2015; Goldberg 2016; Sanger 2012; Stevenson 2014; Wehrey 2014.

63 Goldberg, 2016, op. cit.

64 Sanger, 2012, p. 364.

STICKING WITH YOUR ALLY - EXPLAINING RUSSIA'S SUPPORT FOR THE ASSAD REGIME

Hanna Notte

Introduction

Over the past eighteen months, Russia has shown that it is a pivotal player in the Syrian civil war. Its military intervention since September 2015 has been a game-changer. Especially over the second half of 2016, which witnessed renewed rapprochement with Ankara, continued close cooperation with Tehran and Russia's assisting the Syrian regime in breaking the rebellion in Aleppo, Moscow has increasingly been able to set the terms of Syria diplomacy. Currently, Russia is not only co-sponsoring the Astana track and playing a dominating role at the Geneva talks, but is also often key arbiter on the Syrian ground, whether in recently forging a deal in Aleppo Province between Kurdish forces and the Assad regime, or overseeing evacuation arrangements from rebel-held neighborhoods in Homs Province. Yet, while Russia's significant influence on developments in Syria has long been obvious to even the cursory observer, the underlying drivers of Russia's strategy – security and ideological – are less clearly understood. Thus, Russian foreign policy decisions have routinely caught Western observers by surprise and perpetuated the idea that Russian actions are unpredictable at best, irrational at worst.

It is true that analysts who focus on Russia are challenged by a lack of transparency, which obscures understanding of how specific foreign policy decisions are taken. However, much can be learnt about the Kremlin's position on Syria by evaluating it in the context of Moscow's perspective on a post-Arab Spring

Middle East, the Russian regime's domestic priorities, as well as its broader relationship with the West. This article will examine the key drivers of Russia's Syria policy, distinguishing between Russian interests and perspectives as they relate to state order, geopolitics and status. The analysis will explain not only why Russia has been steadfast in its support for the Assad regime, but also why it has escalated its involvement at various points throughout the war.

‘The more the Middle East gets unstable, the higher the risk of people with malicious purposes causing us trouble.’¹

First, a concern with “state order”, or regime stability, is essential to Russia's view on the Syrian conflict. As things are seen from Moscow, none of the outside actors propagating regime change have a credible plan for ensuring the orderly survival of existing Syrian state institutions after Assad's forced departure. Russia fears the collapse of institutions and concomitant spread of chaos, since it believes that instability will further strengthen radical Islamist factions and facilitate their spillover beyond Syria's borders. This would pose a real security threat to the Russian Federation itself, if extremists move to the North Caucasus, other Russian regions or Central Asia.

A fear of the above-outlined causal chain – the removal of strong leaders leads to state collapse, which leads to the rise of radical Islamist groups – has more broadly characterised Russia's reaction to the ‘Arab Spring’. While the initial Russian response to events in Egypt and Tunisia was relatively low-key, Russian experts and diplomats voiced cautious concerns from the start. Following Muammar Gaddafi's overthrow in Libya in October 2011, Moscow's view of the ‘Arab Spring’ as a phenomenon that primarily strengthens Islamist extremism solidified.

1 Sergey Lavrov, “Interview to Ekho Moskvy”, in “Russia warns Arab aftershocks may rattle North Caucasus”, RT, 2 March 2011, available at: <https://www.rt.com/politics/russia-arab-unrest-caucasus/>, accessed 23 March 2017.



It is important to understand these concerns in their historical context: After the collapse of the Soviet Union, unrest among Russia's indigenous Muslim populations in the North Caucasus transformed the Middle East into a potentially dangerous source of destabilization, given the transnational dynamics of Muslim solidarity. Today, Moscow's insistence that transnational Islamist terrorism threatens the very integrity of the Syrian state echoes similar claims the Kremlin made during Russia's Second Chechen War in the early 2000s². At that time, Chechen separatism and terrorist attacks were perceived by the government as a possible source of spillover to other Russian regions. In an interview in 2000, President Putin warned that "the essence of the situation in the North Caucasus and in Chechnya ... is the continuation of the collapse of the USSR. If we did not quickly do something to stop it, Russia as a state in its current form would cease to exist.... we would be facing... the Yugoslavization of Russia"³. Following the terrorist attacks of "9/11" and the October 2001 US invasion in Afghanistan, the Kremlin held weekly press conferences to support claims that Chechens had links to the Taliban and provided the largest contingent of al-Qaeda's foreign legion in Afghanistan. The Second Chechen War was thus presented as a conflict mostly fuelled by outside forces.

Equally, in Syria, Russia has described the armed opposition groups on the ground as foreign mercenaries supported by external players, who try to use the conflict in Syria to promote their own political goals. This has resulted in the reductionist Russian discourse of a binary struggle between Assad and the terrorists. As was the case with Chechnya, Russia has rejected any distinction between 'good' and 'bad' opponents and has frequently called on the US to specify the location of any 'moderate' rebels in Syria. Both in Chechnya and Syria, Russia has claimed it is fighting a primarily *terrorist* threat, which raises not only the spectre of state disintegration, but also has a

transnational, indeed civilizational, dimension⁴.

While it is important to acknowledge Russia's bitter experience during the Chechen Wars as one key prism through which Moscow looks at Syria today, one still has to ask how well-founded the concerns with an Islamist "spillover" from Syria to Russia really are. Two weeks before the Russian military commenced airstrikes in Syria in September 2015, Vladimir Putin argued at the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) meeting in Dushanbe that "militants undergoing ideological indoctrination and military training by ISIS come from many nations around the world, including... the Russian Federation, and many former Soviet republics. And, of course, we are concerned by their possible return to our territories"⁵.

According to President Putin's most recent remarks on the subject, up to 4,000 Russian citizens are fighting in terrorist formations in Syria, joined by an additional 5,000 citizens from other post-Soviet republics⁶. Of course, such official numbers always need to be used with caution. But there is no question that Russia has been increasingly worried about ISIL's influence in the North Caucasus, especially Dagestan. People pledging allegiance to ISIL have carried out a number of sometimes deadly strikes in Dagestan over the past year (and most recently in Moscow and Nizhny Novgorod⁷), though these have gone largely unnoticed in the Western press. The Federal Security Service (FSB) has reportedly thwarted a number of ISIL-inspired attacks over the past months, both in Moscow

4 Some authors have even drawn a parallel specifically between Russian military tactics used in the bombing of Grozny in 2000 and those in Aleppo in recent months, see: Mark Galeotti, 'Putin is playing by Grozny rules in Aleppo', *Foreign Policy* (September 2016); Michael Kimmelman, 'Berlin, 1945; Grozny, 2000; Aleppo, 2016', *The New York Times* (October 14, 2016).

5 Vladimir Putin, Speech at CSTO Collective Security Council session in Dushanbe (September 15, 2015), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50291>.

6 'Putin Rasskazal O Chisle Voishchih Na Storone Boevikov V Sirii Rossiian', *Gazeta* (February 23, 2017), available at: <https://www.gazeta.ru/army/news/9721685.shtml>.

7 'Islamskoe gosudarstvo vzialo na sebia otvetstvennost' za napadenie v Nizhnem Novgorode', *Kommersant* (October 26, 2016), available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3126516> and 'Specsluzhby predotvratili krupnyj terakt v Moskve 8 marta', *Izvestia* (March 15, 2017), available at: <http://izvestia.ru/news/670625>.

2 For a comparison of Russia's perspective on the Second Chechen War and the Syrian civil war, see: Fiona Hill, 'The Real Reason Putin Supports Assad', *Foreign Affairs* (March 25, 2013); Hanna Notte, 'Russia in Chechnya and Syria: Pursuit of Strategic Goals', *Middle East Policy Council*, Volume XXIII, No. 1, Spring 2016.

3 Quoted in: Gevorkyan, N. Timakova, N. and Kolesnikov A., (2000) *Ot pervogo litsa razgovory s Vladimirom Putinyim* (Moscow: Vagrius), pp.133-135.

and St. Petersburg, but also outside large urban centres⁸. Counterterrorism operations are conducted frequently in the North Caucasus, especially Dagestan, but also Ingushetia and even Kabardino-Balkaria. In light of these developments, according to a 2016 opinion poll, fears amongst Russia's population about growing unrest in that region are again on the rise, after cautious optimism the year before⁹.

The Kremlin's worries about radical Islamism and its repercussions extend beyond the North Caucasus. Russia has also been worried about an ISIL infiltration across the Afghan-Tajik border¹⁰. Throughout the past two years, Russia has continued to pledge help to Tajikistan's military to counter terrorism, for instance by reinforcing Dushanbe's military base by one hundred armored personnel carriers and battle tanks¹¹. In early January, Moscow's Ambassador to Dushanbe suggested that Russia was seeking to further expand its military presence in Tajikistan by renting the Ayni airbase¹². Warnings about ISIL's intention to build and consolidate its 'Khorasan Province', which includes Central Asia, have been voiced not only by the Tajik

8 'V FSB zaivili o predotvrashhenii teraktov v Ingushetii i Moskve', *Kavkaz Uzel* (November 15, 2016), available at: http://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/292654/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter and 'Rossiiskie spetsluzhby v 2016 godu predotvratili 42 terakta', *Ria Novosti* (December 13, 2016), available at: <https://ria.ru/incidents/20161213/1483445190.html>.

9 Levada Center, 'Vospriiatie Situatsii Na Severnom Kavkaze: Opros Proveden 22-25 Ianvaria 2016 Goda' (February 2016), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/02/16/vospriyatie-situatsii-na-severnom-kavkaze/>.

10 For a recent statement, see Zamir Kabulov, Russia's special representative for Afghanistan: 'Zamir Kabulov: Situatsiia v Afganistane nakaliaet obstanovku v Tadjikistane', *news.tj* (September 13, 2016), available at: <http://news.tj/ru/news/tajikistan/security/20160913/230788>.

11 'Some 100 military units delivered to Russian military base in Tajikistan', *Tass*, (June 24, 2016), available at: <http://tass.ru/en/defense/881741>. Some Western experts on Central Asia have criticised Moscow for using the ISIL threat narrative in Central Asia to increase its leverage over the republics and justify why they need to militarily and politically work closely with Russia, for instance see: Noah Tucker, 'Islamic State messaging to Central Asians Migrant Workers in Russia', *CERIA Brief*, No. 6 (March 2015) and Edward Lemon, 'Russia Sees IS as Reason to Boost Control in Central Asia', *Eurasianet* (November 11, 2014), available at <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/70866>.

12 Kucera, J., 'Russia Announces Intent to Establish Air Base in Tajikistan', *Eurasianet* (January 2, 2017), available at: http://www.eurasianet.org/node/81826?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter.

leadership, but also from other regional heads, for instance Kyrgyzstan's Almazbek Atambaev¹³.

Then, there is the daunting challenge of managing a big Central Asian migrant population at home, in Russia's industrial cities, such as Moscow, Vladivostok or Tyumen. Most Central Asians are radicalized and lured into the Syrian jihad while working in Russia, rather than in their home countries¹⁴. Recruitment processes amongst those communities are difficult to study empirically, but there is evidence that people are approached on work sites, in gyms and unofficial mosques, which are often attended by migrants. In Moscow, for instance, even the widely reported and much celebrated opening of the Cathedral Mosque in September 2015 is unlikely to mitigate the shortage of official places for worship. Without local imams who speak their native language to turn to for guidance, many migrants participate in online devotional communities, where they often end up being targeted by extremist recruiters.

Yet, as important as it is to understand these dynamics, the Islamist spillover concern is not the primary driver of Moscow's strategy in the Syrian war. Extremists have been leaving the North Caucasus for Syria in significant numbers since the beginning of the civil war, yet Russia did not see the need for 'counterterrorism' airstrikes until September 2015¹⁵. And then, it did not even primarily target ISIL on the ground. Instead, Moscow's decision to escalate its involvement in Syria

13 Ne grozi iuzhnomu frontu: Kak Rossiia namerena borot'sia s IG eshhe i v Srednei Azii', *Lenta*, (October 20, 2015), available at: <https://lenta.ru/articles/2015/10/20/khorasan/>. According to recent analysis by the Jamestown Foundation, there is evidence that ISIL, under pressure in Iraq and Syria, is diverting some of its Tajik fighters to Afghanistan via Iran, see: E. Lemon: 'To Afghanistan Not Syria? Islamic State Diverts Tajik Fighters South', *Eurasia Daily Monitor Volume*, Vol. 14, Issue 35 (March 15, 2017), available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/afghanistan-not-syria-islamic-state-diverts-tajik-fighters-south/>.

14 Noah Tucker, 'Central Asian Involvement in the Conflict in Syria and Iraq: Drivers and Responses'.

15 International Crisis Group, 'The North Caucasus Insurgency and Syria: An Exported Jihad?' (March 2016). The report alleges that, up until the Sochi Olympics in early 2014, Russian officials did little to prevent radicalised Islamists from leaving for Syria. Instead, the overarching concern at that time was to keep the North Caucasus secure for the Sochi Games. The FSB only became worried about the outflow (and possible return) of extremists from mid-2014, tightening border and airport controls, etc.

was prompted by the successes in early 2015 of those armed opposition groups, which threatened Russia's core objective of Syrian regime survival. While Russian officials have tended to classify any armed opposition as 'terrorist', they have also argued that the foreign fighter threat directed at the Russian Federation itself emanates mostly from ISIL and Al-Qaeda affiliated groups. Unlike saving the Assad regime, fighting ISIL to preempt a 'spillover' has never been Russia's main objective in Syria. Nonetheless, the bitter experience of the Chechen wars remains formative in shaping the Kremlin's approach to counterterrorism, both domestically and in the Middle East. Russian fears about the repercussions of radical Islam are real. They are central to Russia's own perceived vulnerability as a country located in a non-benign regional environment close to instability in the Middle East, with its own large Sunni Muslim population and history of terrorist attacks. The post-Soviet foreign fighter phenomenon, while not a decisive concern, is therefore still important to fully understand Russia's motives in Syria.

One should also note that the fear of Islamist spillover is only one element on a whole spectrum of Russian security concerns related to Syria. Russia's strategy has been always carefully calibrated to prevent the Syrian conflict from escalating into a full-scale regional war with incalculable risks. To that end, the Kremlin has proved its readiness to engage in diplomatically innovative, militarily escalating, or indeed de-escalating measures, depending on its specific need. For instance, in September 2013, the credible threat of a US military strike against the Assad regime, following the chemical weapons attack near Eastern Ghouta on August 21, was crucial in eliciting Russia's readiness to work with the US and international partners towards the removal and destruction of Syria's declared chemical weapons stockpile. At the time, some in Moscow worried US strikes could draw more regional actors into the conflict and ignite a larger war. A year ago, it then appeared that Russian concerns about Saudi Arabia and Turkey stepping up their direct military involvement partially prompted the decision in Moscow to publicly announce the withdrawal of most Russian military forces from Syria, though the actual extent of that withdrawal remained contested

afterwards¹⁶. And most recently, Russia has engaged in both military and diplomatic efforts to prevent clashes between Turkish and Kurdish forces in Northern Syria, and remains highly alert to any possible military escalation pitting Israel against the Syrian regime and its ally Hezbollah¹⁷. While Russia's overall strategy of supporting the Assad regime has been consistent, its desire to avoid outright regional war thus continues to prompt tactical adjustments to that strategy at crucial inflection points in the conflict.

'We are not in the business of regime change.'¹⁸

Russia's support for the Syrian regime has not just been driven by a fear of regional instability and Islamist spillover. Crucially, Moscow also claims it rejects calls for Assad's departure as a matter of principle, and it is ready to thwart what it views as yet another Western attempt of imposing standards of political legitimacy on a sovereign state. Russia's official rhetoric on the Syrian crisis, couched in the language of legality, has made constant references to past Western-backed foreign interventions in the broader Middle East as having violated international law, while the Kremlin stresses that its own involvement in the Syrian conflict was requested by the recognised government of the country, therefore representing an "intervention by invitation"¹⁹. Moscow's grievances with what it views as Western-style 'democracy promotion' efforts have

16 For an example of this argument, see: Vasily Kuznetsov, 'Vyvod nashego osnovnogo kontingenta iz Sirii napravlen na to, chtoby prostimulirovat' Bashara Asada na vedenie peregovorov' (March 17, 2016), available at: <http://politcom.ru/20880.html>.

17 In early March, Russia brokered a deal in which the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) handed over villages near Manbij, in Aleppo Province, to the Syrian regime. Later in March, Israeli airstrikes near Palmyra, likely targeting weapons convoys intended for Hezbollah, prompted Syria to launch anti-aircraft missiles. Following the incident, the Russian Foreign Ministry summoned the Israeli Ambassador in Moscow for a reprimand, in what looked like an attempt to "mollify" Syria and Iran to diffuse tension.

18 Sergey Lavrov, 'Interview to RT' (21 December 2012), available at: <https://www.rt.com/op-edge/lavrov-interview-syria-iran-528/>.

19 Roy Allison, 'Russia and the post-2014 international order: revisionism, Realpolitik and regime change', Public Lecture, Russian and Eastern European Studies, School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies, University of Oxford (January 16, 2017).

been a consistent theme throughout the post-‘9/11’ Global War on Terror, but have intensified over time.

Viewing the Taliban as a threat to its own national security, Russia supported the October 2001 US-led campaign in Afghanistan, but as Washington progressively adopted a narrative of state-building in the country, Russia became increasingly critical²⁰. Russia was then opposed to the 2003 invasion in Iraq; yet once claims of weapons of mass destruction inside Iraq proved unfounded and the language of ‘regime change’ figured more prominently in the US’ discourse on the war, Russia’s criticism grew even more intense. Further, it observed with utter dismay how the 2011 intervention in Libya eventually led to regime change. Given the more recent political instability and strengthening of ISIL in the country, references to the ‘Libyan experience’ feature prominently in the Russian discourse on Syria today. Finally, Russia expressed worries about possible US regime change intentions against Damascus already long before the outbreak of the Syria crisis in 2011. Whether it was President George W. Bush declaring Syria to be part of an ‘axis of evil’ in January 2002, or the US stepping up its criticism of the Assad regime following the assassination of Rafik Hariri in Beirut in February 2005 – Russia always made clear that it would not tolerate externally orchestrated regime change in Syria. Its current stance needs to be understood in this historical perspective.

While Moscow’s current support for Damascus needs to be understood in this historical perspective, it is a fear of contagion of democracy promotion efforts beyond the Middle East that lies at the core of its misgivings. Already during the Libya crisis, Lavrov argued that sowing a belief among people that ‘foreigners will help us’ overthrow the regime may be ‘contagious’, and could ‘spread to protesters in *other* countries of the region’ hoping for assistance from the international community, and that this would be ‘an invitation to a whole array of civil wars’²¹. Fears about a Western-

20 For an excellent discussion of Russian objections to perceived Western-orchestrated regime change and democracy promotion objectives, in Afghanistan, Iraq and beyond, see: Roy Allison (2013) *Russia, the West, and Military Intervention* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

21 Sergey Lavrov at a press conference in Tskhinvali (April 26, 2011), BBC Summary of World Broadcasts: Former Soviet Union; quoted in: Roy Allison, (2013) ‘Russia and Syria: Explaining Alignment With A Regime In Crisis’, *International*

backed regime change dynamic spreading like a virus ultimately betray the Russian regime’s paranoia about ‘colour revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space, which Russia perceives as its legitimate sphere of influence. Moscow’s reaction to the popular uprisings in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan between 2003 and 2005, when the Kremlin staunchly alleged these had been staged by the West, are a case in point.

Its fear of ‘colour revolutions’ in the post-Soviet space aside, adopting an uncompromising stance on the unfolding Syrian crisis has in the final instance also been critical for the Kremlin’s power consolidation at home. President Putin’s anti-Western outlook since 2011, which has underpinned Russia’s increasingly illiberal conception of democracy and assisted the President’s efforts to retain highly centralized control, has shaped Russia’s rhetoric on the Syrian war. That rhetoric, in turn has served Kremlin propaganda, emphasizing the West’s moral corruption and securitizing the Syrian crisis as a fight of existential importance.

First, as the Russian regime has adopted an increasingly anti-Western outlook in recent years, it has promulgated a ‘clash of values’ between Western decadence and moral decay on the one hand, and Russian protection of tradition and conservative values on the other. The Russian Orthodox Church, an increasingly powerful lobby on the Kremlin’s foreign policy, has echoed this anti-Western rhetoric, which has served neatly to support the Kremlin’s narrative on the Syrian war: Russia has been portrayed as a bulwark of stability and a guarantor of national identities and state order in the Middle East. It has also been depicted as the only major power that is truly serious about fighting the threat posed by ISIL. In his much-anticipated September 2015 remarks to the UN General Assembly, President Putin proposed an ‘anti-Hitler’-type coalition to fight ISIL²². Russian officials keep referencing this speech to this day, in order to express their disappointment that Western states have not yet joined such a coalition.

Secondly, the Russian discourse has securitized the Syrian crisis as a fight of existential importance. As argued in the preceding section, the conflict in Syria has

Affairs, Vol. 89, No. 4.

22 Vladimir Putin, ‘Address to the 70th Session of the UN General Assembly’ (September 28, 2015), available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/50385>.

been essentially reduced to a struggle between Assad and the terrorists, the civilised and the barbarians of ISIL. In perpetually producing narratives of external threats that Russia needs to stand up against – the fascists in Ukraine, international terrorism in Syria – the Kremlin has preoccupied the public mind and diverted attention from pressing domestic problems²³. And by imbuing Russia's campaigns abroad with the importance of a higher moral order, the official narrative has additionally given the domestic populace a sense of pride and urgency, intended to fuel patriotism.

In this context, since the Ukrainian threat narrative had to some extent run its course by mid-2015 and the war there was seen as protracting without significant results, some analysts argued that the start of Russian airstrikes in Syria also came in handy to ensure continued popular mobilization²⁴. There are limits to this argument, though, because it appears that the Syria campaign has been less relevant to regime consolidation purposes, than the annexation of Crimea or the conflict in Eastern Ukraine have been. In early October last year, when Russians were polled regarding their support for the use of Russian troops in Syria, only 47% voiced approval, while 33% expressed clear reservations²⁵. At the end of the day, Syria is not part of Putin's 'Russkiy mir'²⁶. And the involvement in a Middle Eastern country evoked fears of a 'second Afghanistan' among almost half of the respondents polled just after airstrikes began²⁷. The regime therefore had to give

23 Andrey Kolesnikov of the Carnegie Moscow Center comments on how the Russian state is using constant war for popular mobilization: "A constant war waged in the name of peace and running in the background. This is what the Russian ruling class needs to preserve itself ... The goal of maintaining power requires that the show must go on... Once set in motion with Crimea, Donbass, or Syria, the machine cannot stop." Andrey Kolesnikov, 'A Background War', *Vedomosti* (October 22, 2015), available at <http://carnegie.ru/2015/10/22/background-war-pub-61689>.

24 See for instance: Jeffrey Mankoff, 'A Syrian Sleight of Hand — To Deescalate in Donbass, Putin Moves to the Mediterranean', *Foreign Affairs* (October 13, 2015).

25 Levada-Center survey, which took place between 2-5 October 2015 ("Do you support the Federation Council's decision to allow the use of Russian troops abroad?"), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/eng/russian-participation-syrian-conflict>.

26 "Russkiy mir" is Russian for "Russian world".

27 Levada-Center survey, which took place between 23-26 October 2015 ("In your opinion, is it possible that Russian military involvement in the Syrian conflict could escalate into a

clear assurances that there would be no ground troops deployed to Syria. While Russian casualties in Syria are presently limited to 28 in the official account, which is low especially if compared to Iranian, Turkish or Hezbollah losses, the use of private military contractors and casualties among their ranks remain staunchly denied by the Kremlin, which is mindful of possible public reactions to mounting Russian deaths in combat abroad²⁸. Since polls on domestic attitudes towards the military operation in Syria have not changed much over the past year, with support still hovering around just 50 percent²⁹, popular mobilization over the Syria campaign will remain more limited than enthusiasm over Russian involvement in Crimea or the Donbass, and the Kremlin understands this well.

'Without Bashar, there will be no Russia in the Middle East.'³⁰

Leaving aside Russian security concerns which, as argued, range from Islamist spillover to regional war to colour revolutions in post-Soviet countries, there are also more sober geopolitical interests at stake in Syria. For Russia, its relationship with the Assad regime represents the core of its regional post-Soviet presence and provides the sole remaining basis from which power can be projected. Developments in recent months have clearly confirmed that Moscow has both the desire and ability to expand power-projection capabilities in the Middle East. In military terms, Russia has launched attacks in Syria from the Caspian Sea, submarines, the Iranian Hamadan base, its Black Sea Fleet and its only

"New Afghanistan" for Russia?), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/en/2015/11/06/russian-participation-in-the-syrian-military-conflict/>.

28 P. Felgenhauer, 'Private Military Companies Forming Vanguard Of Russian Foreign Operations', *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 14, Issue 36 (March 16, 2017), available at: <https://jamestown.org/program/private-military-companies-forming-vanguard-russian-foreign-operations/> and 'Oni srazhalis' za Siriïu - Kto na samom dele voïuet v Arabskoi Respublike', *Kommersant* (March 9, 2017), available at: <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc/3237004>.

29 "Siriïskii Konflikt", *Levada Center Poll* (October 31, 2016), available at: <http://www.levada.ru/2016/10/31/sirijskij-konflikt/>.

30 Alexei Malashenko, 'Ne budet Bashara — ne budet na Blizhnem Vostoke Rossii', *Carnegie Moscow Center* (March 23, 2016), available at: <http://carnegie.ru/publications/?fa=63192>.

aircraft carrier, the Admiral Kuznetsov. Substantial military hardware has been deployed to Syria, including the S-400 and S-300, an oscillating number of fighter aircraft, tanks, submarines, destroyers and surveillance and reconnaissance aircraft³¹.

Meanwhile, against the backdrop of renewed Russian-Turkish diplomacy on Syria last summer, the Russian press wrote that Turkey might provide its Incirlik base, which hosts NATO, for Russian operations in Syria. The Iraqi prime minister proceeded to grant the Russians conditional permission for using Iraqi airspace, while former Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh invited them to use Yemeni airbases in the fight against terrorism. More recently, after it was passed by the State Duma, President Putin signed a federal law confirming Russia's indefinite deployment of forces at Hmeymim and started talks with Egypt to restore the old Soviet air base in Sidi Barrani on the Mediterranean coast. As far as 'projecting power' goes, Moscow has upped the ante in the region.

Russia's desire to display its leverage credibly must be understood in the context of its broader relationship with the United States (US), which remains of crucial importance to Moscow: While Russia's military escalation in Syria in September 2015 was undoubtedly prompted by the perceived need to prop up an Assad regime which was at this point losing territory, an additional motivation was likely to change facts on the ground in a way that would force the US to engage Russia more actively in diplomacy. Moscow, it appears, was quite keen to prevent a further worsening in Russia-West relations at the time. It believed the Syrian crisis could be instrumentalised to create conditions in which Moscow and Washington had to talk to each other again.

Moscow defined this as a desirable objective because – despite its often hostile, anti-Western rhetoric – Russia is not interested in a sustained crisis with the West. The idea that Russia would use airstrikes in Syria

to pursue an improvement in relations with the US might sound outlandish to Western observers, but it was frequently articulated within the Moscow expert community at the time. Whether the Kremlin hoped that a 'thaw' in Russia-West relations would yield more concrete benefits – a settlement of the Ukraine crisis on terms acceptable to Russia, or the lifting of sanctions – is a matter of speculation. But it is plausible to argue that a *general* desire to prevent Russia-West relations from unravelling further has been a supporting driver of Russia's constant call for cooperation over Syria. Moscow's relentless demands for joint action with Washington, especially counterterrorism cooperation, show how valuable the perception of an equal partnership with the White House is for the Kremlin.

*'The Middle East is a way to showcase that the period of Russia's absence from the international scene as a first-rate state has ended.'*³²

The Russian desire to play a key role in mediating the Syrian war on equal terms with Washington highlights a final driver of its strategy: the importance it attaches to international 'status'. While even Realists admit that all states care about status (Robert Gilpin called 'prestige' the 'everyday currency of international politics'), post-Soviet Russia seems to do so disproportionately. Though Russia lost its superpower status with the end of the Cold War, successive Russian elites refused to accept that their country had therefore become a lesser power. The status literature suggests that states, which are eager to defend or gain status and respect internationally, either imitate or compete with more respected powers³³.

In escalating its role in the Syrian war in a carefully calibrated way, Russia has forced the US and other players to accept it as an indispensable mediator of

31 For a detailed overview of Russia's military deployment to Syria until mid-2016, see: 'The Syrian Frontier' (available only in Russian), *Centre for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies* (2016), available at: <http://cast.ru/upload/iblock/686/6864bf9d4485b9cd83cc3614575e646a.pdf>. Following the latest Russia-Turkey negotiated ceasefire in Syria, Moscow announced in early January 2017 its intent to withdraw its aircraft carrier from Syria and scale down its military presence.

32 Fyodor Lukyanov, quoted in: Yaroslav Trofimov, 'Russia's Long Road To The Middle East', *The Wall Street Journal* (May 27, 2016).

33 D. W. Larson and A. Shevchenko, 'Russia says no: Power, status, and emotions in foreign policy', in Heller, R. (et. al.), "Special issue: "Russia and Emotions in Russian Foreign Policy", *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* (October 2014).

the conflict, and as a force to be reckoned with in the wider region. The Russian play has clearly served its quest for status recognition, especially since it has allowed the Kremlin to showcase Russia's latest military prowess, which is considered an important status marker in international politics. If one adds Russia's grandstanding rhetoric about 'carrying the torch in the fight against international terrorism' to the picture, it seems clear that Russia's involvement in Syria has betrayed the desire to project a certain image, domestically and internationally. Few episodes illustrate this as vividly as the Kremlin's staging of a triumphal concert in Palmyra earlier last year, after Russia-backed forces had recaptured the site from ISIL.

Conclusion

Having looked at the key drivers of Russia's Syria policy, what informed guesses can we make about future developments and what are the important questions we should be asking forward?

Given its central concern with the protection of Syrian state order – both as a warning shot against regime change intentions in post-Soviet countries and as an insurance policy against Islamist spillover from the Middle East – Russia will continue to take any necessary steps to ensure the survival of Syrian state institutions against perceived outside meddling. If one reflects on the range of actions Russia has undertaken throughout this civil war – from working with the US on Syrian chemical weapons demilitarization, to launching airstrikes in Syria, to navigating a carefully calibrated course mediating between staunchly opposed actors, whether the Turks and the Kurds, or Israel and Hezbollah – Moscow has been diplomatically savvy and militarily shrewd in pursuit of its goals. There is nothing to suggest that Russian ingenuity has reached its limits.

That being said, Russia's pro-regime agenda remains calibrated to pursue narrow goals. While it is vital that the regime does not succumb to external pressure, Moscow is not committed to enable Assad to retake all of Syria. To that extent, Russian interests are not aligned with those of its partner Iran, whose support for the ruling Assad dynasty has been driven by its desire to retain its regional influence and access to its chain of defense comprising Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and

Yemen. Russia has never been concerned with Bashar Assad's grip to power personally, instead protecting the remnants of Syrian state institutions, and has wanted the Syrian leader to be just about flexible enough for a diplomatic process to remain alive. As long as there is a political track, Russia will be central to it and Russia will be talked about. This is essential to Russia reclaiming status in the Middle East and the international community more broadly.

Yet, it is still early to tell what role the Syrian war is playing in Russia's larger geopolitical game: Are we entering a period in which the Middle East ceases to conveniently serve as a bargaining chip in Russia's relationship with the West, but is acquiring a qualitatively new level of strategic significance for Moscow? Certainly, its growing military involvement in Syria has created opportunities for Moscow to build more robust commercial relationships with other Middle Eastern players, at a time when its gambit of forcing Washington into cooperation appeared to not be paying off. At the same time, Russia's Foreign Ministry has used its growing clout in the region to step up mediation efforts in other theatres, signaling interest in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and, above all, the Libyan crisis³⁴. And as a product of the US relative disengagement from Syria throughout the presidential transition, Russia's assistance in breaking the rebellion in Aleppo, as well as its subsequent co-sponsorship of the Astana process, the Kremlin has put itself firmly into the driving seat of Syria diplomacy. Yet, while Russia appears increasingly able to dominate the Astana and Geneva tracks at the expense of the US, Moscow will likely remain interested in closer cooperation on Syria with the Trump Administration, while not ceding the initiative or escalation dominance to the US government. Since the Pentagon recently reinforced its Marines deployment near Manbij and will be involved in the recapture of Raqqa from ISIL, Russian-US coordination will remain essential, if only to avoid incidents. Whether cooperation exceeding mere military coordination will be possible is something that Russia is still waiting to see, but remains open to³⁵.

34 General Khalifa Haftar, the commander of Libya's armed forces loyal to the country's Tobruk-based government, visited Moscow several times throughout the last months for high-level consultations.

35 'Lavrov: otnosheniia Moskvyy i Vashingtona nahodiatsia

Beyond Syria, does Russia hold an independent ‘vision’ for a regional security order? In his appearance at the latest Valdai Club meeting in October, President Putin called for a ‘kind of Marshall Plan’ for the Middle East³⁶, while representatives of Moscow’s expert community advocate for Russian mediation between the GCC and Iran³⁷. Whether such intentions are actionable depends not just on President Trump’s policies towards the Middle East, or the economic means the Russian Federation will be able to exert, but also on whether regional players are receptive to Russia playing the role it envisions. How these trends will play out remains, at present, in the realm of speculation. What seems certain, for now, is that Moscow’s Syria policy will remain carefully calibrated to further what is Russia’s understanding of state order in the Middle East and, by extension, the post-Soviet space.

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v rezhime “pauzy v ozhidanii”, *Tass* (March 23, 2017), available at:
http://tass.ru/politika/4118537?utm_source=twitter.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=smm_social_share.

36 ‘Vladimir Putin Meets With Members of the Valdai Discussion Club. Transcript of the Plenary Session of the 13th Annual Meeting’ (October 27, 2016), available at: <http://valdaiclub.com/events/posts/articles/vladimir-putin-took-part-in-the-valdai-discussion-club-s-plenary-session/>.

37 A. Aksenok, ‘Russia-GCC Relations After The Signing Of The JCPOA With Iran’, *Russian International Affairs Council* (March 15, 2017), available at: http://russiancouncil.ru/en/inner/?id_4=8819#top-content.



SAUDI ARABIA'S SYRIA POLICY

Neil Quilliam

Introduction

Saudi Arabia's policy towards Syria since the Arab spring protests in 2011 has undergone several key changes. What started out as a policy of accommodation intended to persuade Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to desist crushing protests and instead introduce reforms, turned into one that corralled the armed opposition groups into an effective fighting force intent on overthrowing the Syrian regime.

The kingdom's Syria policy underwent a transformation between 2011-16. The drivers of the policy remained the same, which were to prevent contagion from the Arab spring reaching the Gulf Arab states, except Bahrain, and checking Iranian influence in the region. Nevertheless, the tactics employed to achieve those goals evolved over time and included the following: encouraging Assad to reform; lending qualified support to the Muslim Brotherhood dominated Syrian National Council (SNC); playing a dominant role in the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC); arming the Free Syrian Army (FSA); supporting the Islamic Front; pledging to send troops to fight in Syria; and hosting Syrian armed groups in December 2015.

This article aims to better understand Saudi Arabia's policy towards Syria since 2011 and to account for the changes that have taken place. By doing so, it will examine the domestic, regional and international factors that have shaped Saudi policy. Furthermore, it will highlight the key events that precipitated a radical change in policy.

Although Saudi Arabia possesses formal institutions, a bureaucratic process, think tanks and universities to support policy formulation, decision-making in the kingdom remains highly personalized. The king in Saudi Arabia is the ultimate decision-maker and during the final years of King Abdullah's reign, critical

decisions were often held-up for days or even weeks, whilst he suffered poor health. As such, most analysis of Saudi policy, whilst taking into account structural factors, is attributed to the final decision-maker. This also applied to Abdullah's policy towards Syria, which was also highly personalized and often based on the status of his personal relationship with the Syrian leader.

The second factor that has come to dominate Saudi policy is its regional competition with Iran. Whilst the relationship warmed during the Khatami years (1997-2005), the two countries have competed against one another for influence throughout the region since the Iranian revolution in 1979. Both countries appear to view the region as a chequer board and see their relations in zero-sum terms. In keeping with this perspective, Saudi influence in the region has suffered a number of setbacks since the United States (US)-led war on Iraq in 2003, notably, 'losing' Iraq to Iran. The kingdom's policy towards Syria, therefore, has also been viewed as part of a zero-sum game and a piece on the chequer board that its leadership would like to rest from Iran's influence.

The third factor that has come to shape Saudi Arabia's foreign policy has been its approach to the success of the Muslim Brotherhood and other jihadi groups. Following its painful experience of 'blowback' from exporting its discontents and malcontents to Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Saudi ruling family has grown increasingly wary of Islamist groups that operate outside its immediate sphere of influence. Thus, in its policy towards Syria, it has tried to bring Islamist groups operating there under its influence.

Saudi Arabia's policy towards supporting Islamist groups in Syria has differed markedly from Qatar and Turkey, both of which have lent considerable financial and material support to groups too extreme for Saudi consideration. The following sections analyse how the factors that have shaped Saudi Arabia's foreign policy apply to the Syria conflict and focus on domestic, regional and international considerations.

Domestic factors

Historically, the pattern of Saudi-Syrian relations had always ebbed and flowed. Former Syrian president



Hafez al-Assad made a fateful decision to support Iran in its eight year war with Iraq (1980-88) based on national interest and counter-balancing Iraq's threat to the regional order. In effect, it pitted Syria against Iraq's main regional backers, the Gulf Arab states, including Saudi Arabia. However, al-Assad's decision to join the US-led coalition to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1990-91 proved pivotal in restoring relations between Damascus and Riyadh and provided the latter with the chance to 'peel away' Syria from Iran's orbit.¹

When Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father as Syrian president in 2000, the then Saudi crown prince Abdullah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud effectively took him under his patrimonial wing and offered the young leader support. Again, it presented Saudi Arabia with an opportunity to pull Syria away from Iran and more towards its own sphere of influence. If one were to fast forward to 14 February 2005 – nearly two years after the US-led war on Iraq, which saw Saudi Arabia's influence in its neighbor severely curtailed, then the assassination of former Lebanese prime minister Rafiq Hariri would become the biggest obstacle ever to restoring Saudi-Syrian relations.²

King Abdullah held the Syrian regime accountable for the assassination of Hariri, who had been Saudi Arabia's key client in Lebanon. Not only had Hariri developed successful businesses in Saudi Arabia under the patronage of key members of the ruling family, but he had also been responsible for helping reconstruct Lebanon following the signing of the Taif Accords, which finally brought the Lebanese civil war to a close in 1989. Hariri had played a key role in regenerating aspects of the Lebanese economy, building a strong political constituency and ensuring that Saudi Arabia was an influential actor in the country.³ His assassination, therefore, posed a direct threat to Saudi interests in Lebanon and soured relations between King Abdullah and al-Assad.⁴

1 N. Quilliam (1997) *Syria and the New World Order* (Reading: Ithaca Press), p. 160.

2 A. L. Butters, "A Rapprochement Between Syria and Saudi Arabia?", *Time*, 8 October 2009, available at <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1929072,00.html>, accessed 14 December 2016.

3 "Rafik Hariri: Symbol of Lebanon's Reconstruction", *Arab News*, 15 February 2005, available at <http://www.arabnews.com/node/262392>, accessed 14 December 2016.

4 N. Partrick (ed) (2016) "Saudi Arabia's Relations with

Assad added insult to injury when in 2006, following the Israel-Hizbullah conflict, which lasted for 34 days, he called Abdullah a 'half-man' for not supporting Lebanon during the conflict or calling for a ceasefire.⁵ At the time of the conflict, Assad's ally, Hizbullah leader Hassan Nasrallah was arguably the most popular leader in the Arab world and dwarfed his counterparts in the Gulf Arab states.⁶ Hizbullah's military 'success', which amounted to resisting Israel's military for 34 days emboldened Assad and further strengthened his relations not only with Hizbullah but also Iran, which has proven critical to his survival since the outbreak of the protests in 2011.

Against this backdrop of troubled relations, the patrician Abdullah did his utmost to dissuade Assad from violently suppressing the protests when they first broke out in March 2011. Abdullah's decision to almost forget the past and forge a new relationship with Assad was based on two key factors: heading off the prospect of an Arab spring in Saudi Arabia, which could find fertile ground in the Shia-dominated and oil rich Eastern Province and also in traditionally more conservative cities, such as Qassim; and the opportunity to once again persuade Assad to leave the Iran axis of power. In essence, Abdullah was willing to give Assad one last chance and did so when the Syrian regime cracked down on protestors and attempted to transform what amounted to a reform movement into an armed struggle.⁷

The advent of the Arab spring posed a challenge to the governance models of the Gulf Arab states and in the early days of growing protests in the region it evoked a series of different responses. In most cases, the Gulf

Syria and Lebanon", in *Saudi Arabian Foreign Policy: Conflict and Cooperation*, (London: IB Tauris), p. 210.

5 F. Wehrey, T. Karasic, A. Nader, J. Ghez, L. Hansell and R. Guffey (2009) *Saudi-Iranian Relations since the Fall of Saddam: Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy*, (Santa Monica: Rand), p. 89, available at http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG840.pdf, accessed 14 December 2016.

6 S. Wikas, "The Damascus-Hizbullah Axis: Bashar al-Asad's Vision of a New Middle East", The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Policywatch 1142, 29 August 2006, available at <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-damascus-hizballah-axis-bashar-al-asads-vision-of-a-new-middle-east>, accessed 14 December 2016.

7 J. Logan, "Analysis: Saudi Switch against Syria's Assad Is Blow to Iran", *Reuters*, 9 August 2011, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-syria-idUSTRE7781QS20110809>, accessed 14 December 2016.

Arab governments increased public spending, raised public sector salaries and offered their populations generous financial incentives to remain quiescent.⁸ For the most part, this approach worked, though protests in Bahrain and in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province led to a robust response from the security forces. Indeed, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kuwait intervened militarily in Bahrain to secure the position of the ruling family. However, the intervention was more aimed at securing the al-Khalifa and preventing Iran from extending its direct influence over Saudi Arabia's neighbour.⁹

Abdullah sent his son Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Saud, the then deputy minister of foreign affairs, on three occasions to meet with Assad and counsel strongly against the use of force to quell the protests. His motivation for sending a prominent emissary was not only aimed at averting unnecessary bloodshed, but also at encouraging protestors to seek peaceful means to achieve their goals.

Abdullah's motivation for sending his son to meet directly with Assad was intended, therefore, to prevent further contagion of the Arab spring and, at the same time, offset Iranian influence over the Syrian leader. However, Assad refused on all three occasions to meet with Abdulaziz and host the king's son. Consequently, Abdullah took the diplomatic snub very personally and finally lost patience with the Syrian president – snubbing his son was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back and led the Saudi monarch to work towards undermining and overthrowing Assad.¹⁰

On 8 August 2011, Abdullah made a public declaration 'What is happening in Syria is not acceptable for Saudi Arabia' and he urged Assad to stop his 'killing machine'.¹¹ He withdrew his ambassador to Syria – a move that was quickly followed by Kuwait and Bahrain.¹²

8 S. al-Atiqi, "Labouring against Themselves", 23 February 2013, available at <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/51044?lang=en>, accessed 14 December 2016.

9 E. Bronner, and M. Slackman, "Saudi Troops Enter Bahrain to Help Put Down Unrest", *The New York Times*, 15 March 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/15/world/middleeast/15bahrain.html>, accessed 14 December 2016.

10 C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, (London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 69.

11 C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, (London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 69.

12 N. Bakri, "3 Arab Countries Recall Ambassadors to

Saudi Arabia's change in policy was precipitated by personal insult and animosity; and Abdullah – according to sources close to the king at the time – became not only determined, but also near obsessed with forcing Assad to move aside. The decision to withdraw support from the Syrian regime and bolster the Syrian political opposition, however, was also predicated on the kingdom's loss of influence to Iran throughout the region. Iran's predominance in Iraq, Hizbullah's intransigence in Lebanon and now its support of an Alawi-dominated regime cracking down on a predominantly Sunni majority population heightened Abdullah's sense of political impotence.

Although the succession in Saudi Arabia in January 2015 brought with it considerable change and saw the promotion of next generation leaders to the positions of crown prince and deputy crown prince, it did not lead to a major change in Syria policy. Saudi support for rebel groups has continued; however, Syria, as a priority issue has dropped since the kingdom engaged directly in the conflict in neighbouring Yemen. Winning the war in Yemen has become the priority of the Saudi leadership, especially deputy crown prince Muhammed bin Salman, who has inadvertently staked his reputation on it.¹³

Regional factors

There is strong evidence to support the view that Saudi Arabia's policy towards Syria was shaped by the regional environment. Since 1979, as mentioned before, Iran and Saudi Arabia have been locked into a wide-ranging regional struggle for influence. Prior to 1990, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Arab states supported and relied upon Iraq to counterbalance the military and economic weight of Iran. The diminution of Iraq's power projection after the 1990-91 war had a profound impact on Saudi Arabia's security, which made it increasingly dependent upon the US and to a lesser extent European powers, France and the United Kingdom.

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Syria", *The New York Times*, 8 August 2011, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/08/09/world/middleeast/09syria.html>, accessed 15 December 2016.

13 B. Law, "The Most Dangerous Man in the World?", *The Independent*, 8 January 2016, available at <http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/the-most-dangerous-man-in-the-world-a6803191.html>, accessed 15 December 2016.

The equivocal response of the US towards Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the Arab spring protests in Tahrir Square in January 2011, which eventually led to his removal from office was a major cause for concern for the Saudi ruling family. The al-Saud questioned the reliability of the US, given that the country's security rested under its umbrella, and US President Barack Obama had just wavered in his support for a long-time ally. Abdullah and those around him questioned whether the US would come to the assistance of the Saudi ruling family should Arab spring protests take root in the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia's heightened sense of vulnerability was compounded by the seeming success of Iran's policy towards the region and Obama's clear intention to reach an accommodation over a nuclear deal with Iran. Iran appeared to be in the ascendant and held the prospect of reintegrating into the global economy in its hands.¹⁴

Iran's apparent success in the region served to further frustrate Saudi Arabia's ambitions to check its advances and led the Gulf Arab state to view its competition as a zero sum game. This was made clear to the author during several visits to the kingdom between 2012-15 in a series of meetings with national security officials.

At the same time, the success of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the election of Muhammed Morsi to the presidency in June 2012 posed another threat to Saudi Arabia – both domestically and within the region. Abdullah viewed the Muslim Brotherhood with deep suspicion and along with the UAE sought to outlaw it at home and thwart its political advances in Arab spring countries.¹⁵

The combination of a zero-sum game with Iran and the perceived growing threat from the Muslim Brotherhood sharpened Saudi Arabia's response in Syria. Abdullah appointed in July 2012 Prince Bandar

14 C. Lee and M. Stancati, "Obama's Mideast Mission: Get Saudis, Iran to Make Nice", *The Wall Street Journal*, 19 April 2016, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obamas-mideast-mission-get-saudis-iran-to-make-nice-1461111595>, accessed 14 December 2016.

15 S. Lacroix, "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood Predicament", *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2014, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2014/03/20/saudi-arabias-muslim-brotherhood-predicament/>, accessed 15 December 2016.

bin Sultan al-Saud as Director General of the Saudi Arabian Intelligence Agency, who took over the Syria file from Abdulaziz bin Abdullah al-Saud. Bandar brought with him a much more muscular approach to the Syria policy and immediately set out to arm rebel groups, some of which were closely allied al-Qaida linked groups and ISIS.¹⁶

In conversation with the author, Saudi security officials noted in late 2013 – following the coup in Egypt, which deposed Morsi, that 'we lost Iraq, we lost Egypt, but have it back, we are not going to lose Syria.' The sentiment expressed a change in policy shaped by threat perceptions in the region emanating from Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood.

Saudi Arabia was also deeply suspicious of Turkey and Qatar's approach of working with the Muslim Brotherhood both in Syria and the Arab spring states, so took a more active role in managing and supplying both moderate and Islamist armed rebel factions, as a means of exerting influence over their activities. Concomitantly, relations between Saudi Arabia and Qatar soured to the extent that they backed competing factions within the Syrian political opposition.¹⁷

International factors

The international environment affected Saudi Arabia's Syria policy in several ways. First, Obama's call for Assad to stand aside in August 2011, alongside US interventions in Iraq and Libya, caused many among the Syrian opposition to believe American intervention in the conflict would eventually come. These hopes were boosted when Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia all told their Syrian allies at various times that, 'intervention is coming'.¹⁸

However, Obama himself was skeptical of such action, having opposed George W. Bush's Middle Eastern adventures and seen the chaos that engulfed post-Gaddafi Libya after he was persuaded to intervene there. Yet he did little to dispel these misconceptions.

16 C. Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East* (London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 122.

17 K. Oweis, "Saudi-Qatar Rivalry Divides Syrian Opposition", *Reuters*, 15 January 2014, available at <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-qatar-idUSBREA0E1G720140115>, accessed 15 December 2016.

18 Author's interview with Basma Kodmani, August 2015.

He used hawkish language against Assad, stating on 20 August 2012, 'that a red line for us is we start seeing a whole bunch of chemical weapons moving around or being utilized'.¹⁹

With his red line seemingly crossed with impunity Obama came under significant pressure to act, yet he was torn. On the one hand, he wanted to punish Assad and preserve the international norm against chemical weapons use, especially after the US explicitly warned against it. On the other hand, despite approving a modest CIA program to sponsor select rebel fighters in June 2014²⁰, he was unconvinced that either the political or the armed opposition could provide a viable moderate alternative to Assad.

When the British government unexpectedly lost a rushed vote over their expected involvement in the campaign, Obama took the opportunity to deliberate. While most of his administration favoured the strikes, Joint Chiefs of Staff Martin Dempsey urged caution as did White House Chief of Staff Denis McDonough; and after an evening walk with the latter on 30 August, Obama surprised his staff by announcing that he too would seek congressional endorsement. With the House of Representatives controlled by an obstructive Republican party, approval was not guaranteed, and Obama was likely buying time to explore other options.²¹ Almost immediately secretary of state John Kerry opened channels to the Russians, and Obama met with Putin at the G20 on 6 September. At a press conference a few days later, Kerry seemingly stumbled over the idea of Assad peacefully turning over his chemical weapons to avoid the strike.²² Within days

19 K. Kanat (2015) *A Tale of Four Augusts: Obama's Syria Policy* (Washington DC: SETA), p.99.

20 J. Barnes, A. Entous, A., C. Lee, "Obama Proposes \$500 Million to Aid Syrian Rebels", *The Wall Street Journal*, 26 June 2014, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-proposes-500-million-to-aid-syrian-rebels-1403813486>, accessed 26 November 2016.

21 A. Entous, and C. Lee, "At the Last Minute, Obama Alone Made Call to Seek Congressional Approval", *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 September 2013, available at <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887324009304579047542466837078>, accessed 26 November 2016.

22 M. Gordon, and S. Myers, "Obama Calls Russia Offer on Syria Possible 'Breakthrough'", *The New York Times*, 10 September 2013, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/10/world/middleeast/kerry-says-syria-should-hand-over-all-chemical-arms.html?pagewanted=all&r=0>, accessed 26 November 2016.

Moscow announced a plan to pursue this option and, after US-Russian negotiations in Geneva, it was agreed that Assad would disarm under the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). A UN resolution supporting this was passed unanimously on 27 September and the US assault was called off.²³

The impact on the opposition was clear. The moderate forces championing cooperation with the US and expecting eventual military intervention lost ground to the radicals whose anti-western narrative seemed to be vindicated. In September 2013, Islamist groups, including some formerly affiliated with the moderate Free Syrian Army Supreme Military Command (FSA-SMC) joined with Jubhat al-Nusra to denounce the Western backed political opposition, the Syrian Opposition Coalition. In November, a further group of militia disaffiliated from the FSA-SMC to co-found the Islamic Front.²⁴ This new Salafist military force was actively supported by Saudi Arabia, deeply frustrated with the US for calling off the strike on Assad and willing now to back radical groups opposed by Washington.

Saudi Arabia's frustration with US policy not only towards Syria, but also towards the region has been expressed in both private and public. The Obama administration's so-called pivot to Asia was a cause for concern, as Saudi Arabia questioned US commitment to security in the Gulf. Moreover, Obama's significant diplomatic investment in seeking and reaching a nuclear deal with Iran – a priority that trumped all other regional issues – was seen as move that would neither deter Tehran from pursuing its nuclear ambitions nor constrain its activities in the Gulf or the Levant.

Obama's interview in *The Atlantic*, where he spelled out the tenets of his foreign policy and his successes and failures alluded to 'freeriders' and in that camp he included Saudi Arabia. He had long called upon Saudi Arabia and other such freeriders to assume greater

23 United Nations Security Council, "Security Council Requires Scheduled Destruction of Syria's Chemical Weapons, Unanimously Adopting Resolution 2118 (2013)", 27 September 2013, available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2013/sc11135.doc.htm>, accessed 26 November 2016.

24 BBC, "Guide to the Syria Rebels", 13 December 2013, available at <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003>, accessed 26 November 2016.

responsibility for their own security and the security of their neighbourhoods.²⁵ To a large extent, Saudi policy towards Syria developed against this backdrop and once it had become clear that the US would not intervene in the conflict and that Iran – through its proxies – was helping the Syrian regime recover territory, it opted to intensify efforts to arm and fund rebels, irrespective of their ‘extremism’. As mentioned above, Bandar was instrumental in mobilising armed groups, many of whom were aligned with al-Qaida or ISIS to help fight Assad’s regime.

However, the Russian intervention in September 2015 constrained Saudi Arabia’s ability to fund and arm rebel groups and support their advance in key cities, such as Homs, Hamah and Aleppo. The international factor of Russian intervention, indeed, was a game-changer that affected the course of the Syrian conflict and weakened the growing levels of co-operation amongst Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey in their efforts to oust Assad.

Putin chose to intervene at this particular moment of the conflict for four key reasons: Syrian regime forces were under increasing pressure and losing territory; Saudi Arabia had agreed to host a conference for the Syria opposition²⁶ and established the High Negotiating Committee²⁷; US policy towards Syria and the wider region appeared weak; and to circumvent Russia’s growing international isolation following the annexation of Crimea and its policy towards Ukraine.

Russia calculated that the Assad regime was under severe pressure from opposition forces and required direct material support to guarantee its survival. For the previous six months, the opposition had been forcing the regime back, capturing the major city of Idlib. The Syrian regime appeared at its weakest in the summer

of 2015, as opposition forces and ISIS made significant territorial gains. In June 2015, Assad had given an uncharacteristic speech in which he acknowledged that manpower shortages had made ceding territory necessary. It was the first real indication that the regime was under serious strain and could fall.²⁸ The Russian entry put an end to the rebels’ advances and put paid to any potential for an outright military defeat for the regime.

Whilst Saudi Arabia hosted a conference for the Syrian opposition in December 2015, which brought together all groups, except Jabhat al-Nusra in a bid to undermine Russia and Syria’s narrative (as well as form the High Negotiating Committee), the airstrikes against all opposition groups have continued with impunity. Moscow has claimed that it is at the forefront of a fight against terror, but has overwhelmingly targeted more moderate opposition groups.

Russia’s deployment, therefore, was aimed at securing the regime and helping it to consolidate and recover territory. Without doubt, the intervention has changed the balance of power between regime and opposition forces; importantly, it has also given Russia an indisputable advantage over the US in influencing events on the ground.

Russia’s deployment in September 2015 sent a clear signal to Syria’s regional neighbours, notably Saudi Arabia. It demonstrated a level of commitment that other powers, such as the US or EU states, could not match. Consequently, this allowed the Syrian regime to remain intransigent in international peace talks and once again talk about retaking ‘every inch’ of Syria. The intervention has clearly shown that Assad’s friends are more committed to him than his enemies are to unseat him.

25 J. Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”, *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>, accessed 15 December 2016.

26 “Saudi Arabia Hosts Moderate Syrian Opposition Groups”, *Al Arabiya News*, 8 December 2015, available at <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/2015/12/07/Moderate-Syrian-opposition-groups-arrive-in-Riyadh-.html>, accessed 27 November 2016.

27 Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “Final Statement of the Conference of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces Riyadh”, 14 December 2015, available at <http://www.mofa.gov.sa/sites/mofaen/ServicesAndInformation/ImportantIssues/Pages/ArticleID20151214143757814.aspx>, accessed 27 November 2016.

28 M. Samaan, and A. Barnard, “Assad, in Rare Admission, Says Syria’s Army Lacks Manpower”, *The New York Times*, 26 July 2015, available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/27/world/middleeast/assad-in-rare-admission-says-syrias-army-lacks-manpower.html?_r=0, accessed 27 November 2016.

Conclusion

Saudi Arabia's Syria policy has evolved since 2011, though its key objectives have remained constant – check Iran's influence in the region and prevent contagion from the Arab spring from entering the kingdom. It has adopted a series of tactics that at times appear inimical to its immediate interests, such as funding and arming extremist groups, which arguably could lead to blowback at a later stage.

The kingdom's Syria policy has been shaped by a combination of personal, regional and international factors. Late King Abdullah's approach to Syria was highly personal and had been shaped by earlier events. He believed that he could re-fashion Assad and pull him away from Iran's influence. In fact, he gave him a number of chances to do so, but Assad's insult to Abdulaziz was the final straw. Following that episode, Abdullah's policy was shaped by one objective and that was to rid Syria of Assad and 'flip' the country towards Saudi Arabia.

Arguably, regional factors were the most influential in shaping Saudi Arabia's Syria policy, namely, its competition with Iran, but also its fear of the Muslim Brotherhood exploiting the Arab spring to its own benefit. Saudi Arabia's zero-sum game with Iran has compelled it to pursue policy options aimed at either recovering lost territories and states or at least 'bogging down' Iran in a long and bloody conflict. Cognisant that it had 'lost' Iraq to Iran, Saudi leaders, beginning with Abdullah remain intent on retaining influence in the Syria, even if that means working through proxies and spoiling the regime's chance of re-establishing full control of the country.

It is clear that the international environment, which has seen Russia play a more active role in the Middle East, at a time when the US has shied away from further interventions has forced Saudi Arabia to play a more assertive role in Syria and other theatres, including Yemen. The shift in the international environment has also coincided with succession in Saudi Arabia and given rise to a leadership that pursues more active foreign and defence policies. Therefore, Riyadh will continue to back rebel groups, even though Syria may have dropped in the priority list and the Russian intervention has changed the balance of forces in

favour of the Assad regime. Saudi Arabia has little choice other than to develop a capability to run and maintain an insurgency against the Assad regime, which will also target Iran-backed militias.



TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS SYRIA, 2011-2017

Kostas Ifantis and Ioannis Galariotis

Introduction

Turkey is changing and this change is rapidly disrupting the Kemalist secular tradition.¹ In the foreign policy realm, Turkey has been subjected to wide criticism since the late 2000s. Its priorities in the Middle East and North Africa, at the expense of relations with the West, has been described as heavily grounded in parochial ideology and dangerous sectarianism. This approach, widely known as 'Davutoglu doctrine', has resulted in a significant deterioration of relations with key regional actors, such as Egypt and Israel, and the loss of its potential role as a leader and stabilizer.²

In his 2011 election victory speech, Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed confidence that Ankara would provide support to newly emerging political actors across the Middle East, revealing a clear ambition to establish his country as a preeminent power in the region.³ However, six years later, Turkey is increasingly marginalized; Ankara is criticized for its tolerance of

radical Islamic militants in Syria. From a celebrated 'zero-problems' strategy, Turkey now has less than functioning relations with almost all of its neighbors.⁴ This is partly attributable to the context of its foreign policy, which is ideologically driven rather than interest based.

The main argument of this paper is that Turkey's ideologically driven foreign policy and culture-based diplomacy has chosen to defy the fast-changing balance of power dynamics in the Middle East. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the case of the Syrian crisis. It is now widely accepted that Turkey's policy in Syria was based on a series of miscalculations. Erdogan initially supported Bashar al-Assad, while calling for political reforms. When Syria turned to Iran for assistance, Ankara did nothing to advance post-Arab Spring Turkish preferences. Subsequent events, such as Russian military engagement, and the rapid deterioration of the security landscape only served as a reminder of Ankara's very limited ability to have an impact in the Middle East. In the course of events, Turkey found itself deeply involved in a sectarian conflict that is, by all accounts, bloody, relentless, long-lasting and multi-faceted.

What went wrong? How and why has Turkey become so deeply entangled with the conflict in Syria? What are the implications of lapses in security that have left Ankara without friends and allies? This paper aims to address these questions. After a brief historical account of Turkish-Syrian relations, the discussion seeks to shed light on Turkey's foreign policy aims and designs in the Syrian imbroglio. Ankara's approach and actual engagement post-2011 is assessed in the context of rapidly deteriorating regional and international standing, such that Turkey has accomplished none of its original goals.

1 Many believe that the AKP leadership seeks to reverse the secular legacy of Mustafa Kemal by eliminating restrictions on Islam and undercutting "the old judicial and military order that guarded against the Islamization of Turkey". See Fradkin, Hillel and Libby, Lewis (2013) "Erdogan's Grand Vision: Rise and Decline", *World Affairs Journal*, March/April 2013, <http://www.worldaffairsjournal.org/print/63552>. Also, Reynolds, Michael (2012) "Echoes of Empire: Turkey's Crisis of Kemalism and the Search for an Alternative Foreign Policy", The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, Analysis Paper No 26.

2 Aydin-Duzgit, S. (2015) "Turkish Foreign Policy after the Elections: Where to from here?", *Global Turkey in Europe*, http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/gte_c_25.pdf.

3 For a theoretical critique of Turkey's Middle Eastern policy see Altunisik, M.B. and L.G. Martin (2011) "Making Sense of Turkish Foreign Policy in the Middle East under AKP", *Turkish Studies*, vol.12, no. 4, pp.569-587. Also, see Demirtas-Bagdonas, Özlem (2014) "Reading Turkey's Foreign Policy on Syria: The AKP's Construction of a Great Power Identity and the Politics of Grandeur", *Turkish Studies*, vol.15, no.1, pp.139-155.

4 "Turkey's Foreign Policy in a Changing World: Old Alignments and New Neighbourhoods", International Conference, South East European Studies at Oxford, Oxford 30 April - 2 May 2010, <https://www.sant.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/reportfromtfpconf.pdf>.

From confrontation to cooperation and back

Historically, animosity and distrust have plagued relations between Turkey and Syria. The trajectory of their relationship has been subject to regional developments, conflicting alignments and preferences, and territorial disputes.⁵ In the 1930s, the annexation by Turkey of the 'Sanjak' port in the region of Alexandretta resulted in the freezing of relations.⁶ The Cold War found Turkey siding with the West and NATO, whereas Syria aligned itself with the Soviet Union. During the 1960s, Turkey's⁷ unilateral intention to exploit the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers became a major feud. From that time onwards, Turkey has used its size and power, and the backing of the US, to consolidate its standing in the region. In Damascus, Turkey has always been viewed as a western proxy with hegemonic designs. In the 1980s, a new element was to effect Turkish-Syrian relations, when Syria overtly supported the leader of the terrorist organization, the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan, and offered shelter to PKK fighters. Turkey considered Syria's continued support of the PKK a *casus belli*. Relations deteriorated again, in 1998, when Turkey threatened Syria with war.⁸ Öcalan's expulsion from Syrian territory reduced the tension; with the signing of the Adana agreement relations were significantly improved.

The victory of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) and the advent to power of Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the early 2000s marked a new era in Turkey's foreign policy in the Middle East. The new government, which set the re-organization of the Turkish economy as its basic goal, followed a foreign policy dogma based on the principles of good neighborly relations and the peaceful settlement of disputes. From his early days in office, Erdogan became a strong supporter of Bashar al-

Assad's regime in Syria and the two countries quickly established good relations.⁹ In January 2004, Bashar Assad became the first Syrian leader to visit Turkey. Ankara was instrumental in bringing the Syrian regime out of international isolation after the Hariri assassination in Lebanon and played a major role in 2007 and 2008 with its mediation efforts between Syria and Israel over the Golan Heights. The negotiations collapsed following the Israeli military operation in Gaza in December 2008. In April 2009, the two states conducted their first joint military exercise to be followed in September by the establishment of a Senior Strategic Cooperation Council. For the first time, the NATO military developed ties with the Syrian Armed forces.

Good relations lasted until the outbreak of the Syrian civil war. Erdogan, in encouraging Bashar al-Assad to follow the route of democratic reform, discovered the limits of Turkey's influence over Damascus. The Syrian regime responded with excessive violence, which resulted in an all-out civil war. In a dramatic shift, Ankara abandoned its support of Bashar al-Assad and formed a coalition with opposition groups.¹⁰ For the first time in its history, Turkey openly strived to end a regime in a neighboring country, and treated that regime as an enemy.

Turkey's engagement in the Syrian civil war: An account

Turkey's engagement in the Syrian civil war can be characterized as a volatile policy following the ebb and flow of international security dynamics and regional developments in the wider Middle East. From the outbreak of violence in 2011, Turkey's approach and involvement has changed several times during the course of the conflict.

Turkey's initial response to the Syrian uprising was mild, yet vigilant in order to ensure its interests in the region and to safeguard the status quo. Erdogan attempted to persuade Assad to proceed with major political reforms in order to avoid an increase in anti-

5 Hinnebusch, R. and Ö. Tür (2013) *Turkey-Syria Relations: Between Enmity and Amity* (eds.) (Farnham: Ashgate).

6 Altunisik, M.B. and Ö. Tür (2006) "From Distant Neighbors to Partners? Changing Syrian-Turkish Relations", *Security Dialogue*, vol.37, no.2, pp.229-248.

7 Olson, R. (1997) "Turkey-Syria Relations Since the Gulf War: Kurds and Water", *Middle East Policy*, vol.5, no.2, pp.168-193.

8 Aras, B. and R.K. Polat (2008) "From Conflict to Cooperation: Desecuritization of Turkey's Relations with Syria and Iran", *Security Dialogue*, vol.39, no.5, pp. 495-515.

9 Taspinar, O. (2012) "Turkey's Strategic Vision and Syria", *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.35, no.3: 127-140.

10 Philips, Christopher (2012) "Into the Quagmire: Turkey's Frustrated Syria Policy", Briefing Paper, Chatham House.

regime sentiment and the radicalization of opposition groups inside Syria. As Tocci has argued, “Turkey exerted significant effort to this end, attempting to leverage the political capital built up with the Syrian regime, the poster-child of its now beleaguered ‘zero problems with neighbors’ policy”.¹¹ However, as the crisis unfolded, with conflict and resistance taking place in different areas of Syria, Turkey was less willing to support the regime. By the time that the uprising had escalated and spread to most parts of Syrian territory, Ankara had begun to distance itself from the Syrian regime, explicitly declaring that it could not remain indifferent to the violence.¹²

By the summer of 2011, Turkey, in a dramatic policy shift, took sides against the regime; it expressed unequivocal support for the opposition forces. Under Ankara’s tutelage, the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed in Istanbul in August 2011.¹³ Turkey further supported the moves of the opposition by opening its borders to armed rebel groups. At the same time, it called for the ousting of the Assad regime and the formation of a provisional government that could pave the way for democratic transition in Syria. At that time, the foreign policy preferences of Turkey were fully aligned to those of the United States and Europe.

In September 2011, Turkey took the critical decision to terminate all contact with the regime in Damascus and imposed an arms embargo.¹⁴ In addition, Erdogan and Davutoglu embarked upon an international campaign, calling for Western intervention to topple the regime. In November 2011, Erdogan called for Assad to step down, he openly supported the Syrian opposition, and he did everything he could short of direct military intervention. Indeed, the bloodshed in Syria hardened the attitude of the international community against the Assad regime; the first signs of this position became visible when the US and the European Union started

working towards the imposition of sanctions at the UN Security Council.

The Arab League became more active and proposed a peace plan, which failed to produce any meaningful breakthrough and finally came to an inglorious end in late January 2012.¹⁵ Russia and China extended vigorous support to the Assad regime by exercising their power of veto over a resolution regarding “grave and systematic human rights violations in Syria” and formally rejected the Arab League’s peace proposals in the UN.¹⁶ It was patently clear that the Syrian crisis had been transformed into something similar to a Cold-War great power game.¹⁷ A second initiative towards a cease-fire under the auspices of the then Secretary General Kofi Annan, which aimed to establish a UN Supervision Mission, although accepted by Damascus and most of the international community, including Turkey, proved too little and too late. The escalation of the violence proved too great a hurdle to overcome.¹⁸

France also undertook an important initiative in parallel with Annan’s attempts to end the ceasefire. President Sarkozy managed to rally more than 80 countries¹⁹ to exert pressure on the Assad regime; in April 2012 in Istanbul, the so-called “Friends of Syria” signed the Istanbul Declaration demanding that the Assad regime: (a) put an end to the conflict via the adoption of UN and Arab League proposed reforms and (b) recognize the SNC as a “legitimate representative of all Syrians”, as an umbrella organization leading the opposition groups in Syria.²⁰ The fundamental problem with this approach was that the Muslim Brotherhood was over-represented in the leadership of the SNC. Furthermore, the Islamic militants were over-represented when the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the SNC combined their

11 Tocci, Nathalie (2013) “Turkey, Europe and the Syrian Crisis: What Went Wrong?”, Commentary 08, Global Turkey in Europe, p. 1.

12 Cornell, S. (2012) “Changes in Turkey: What Drives Turkish Foreign Policy”, *Middle East Quarterly*, no 24, pp. 13-24.

13 For a detailed account, see Ilgit, Asli and Rochelle Davis (2013) “The Many Roles of Turkey in the Syrian Crisis”, Middle East Research and Information Project, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero012813>.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Fifield, Anna “Russia and China veto UN censure on Syria”, *Financial Times*, 5 October 2011.

17 For a regional assessment, see Satik, Nerouz and Khalid Walid Mahmoud (2013) “The Syrian Crisis: An Analysis of Neighboring Countries’ Stances”, Policy Analysis, Research Paper, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

18 Doyle, Chris “Kofi Annan’s resignation is no surprise, his Syria peace plan undermined”, *The Guardian*, 2 August 2012, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/aug/02/kofi-annan-resignation-syria-peace-plan>.

19 China, Russia and Iran were excluded.

20 Ilgit and Davis, 2013, op. cit.

forces into a new coalition body, the Syrian National Coalition, in November 2012, and this too impeded any prospect of a peaceful settlement. On 4 October 2012, the Turkish military pounded targets inside Syria in retaliation for a mortar attack a day earlier that had killed five civilians in Turkey. Turkey's parliament approved a motion the same day that authorized further military action against Syria and permitted cross-border raids. Earlier, in June, when Syrian forces had shot down a Turkish warplane, Ankara had refrained from responding.²¹ Since then, Turkey has been trapped in an ethnic and sectarian imbroglio, which became even more complex and violent with the ISIS insurgency.

The unwillingness for any large-scale military engagement on the ground meant that Turkey found itself at odds with the US and Europe. During the late spring of 2013, the US and Russia led another initiative to bring all sides of the Syrian conflict to the negotiating table. Then Ghouta happened. Hundreds of people were killed after a chemical bombardment in the Damascus suburbs on August 21, 2013.²² The Ghouta massacre was another influence on Turkey's approach to the crisis. Ankara intensified its call for military intervention, believing that only the large-scale military involvement of the West, supported by Turkey and the Arab Gulf States, could end the bloodshed and uproot the Assad regime.

In the classic fashion of an ultimatum, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2118 unanimously, demanding that Syria destroy or remove its chemical stockpile by 2014.²³ It also paved the way for the beginning of new discussions between the opposing parties, to take place in Geneva (Geneva II conference). Turkey was afraid that the reluctance of the US and others to pursue a military solution "would end up in *de facto* acceptance of the *status quo ante*, coupled with the continuation of low level violence in the months

and years ahead".²⁴ This approach was another grave disappointment for Ankara, given its overt support for the Syrian Muslim Brothers and tolerance towards the more extreme jihadist groups, like Jabhat al-Nusra and Ahrar al-Sham.

Syrian Kurds' success in Kobane against ISIS and in Ras al-Ain against Jabhat al-Nusra created problems to Ankara's policy. Erdogan was betting on the failure of the Syrian Kurds in order to minimize any Kurdish aspiration for autonomy, backed up by the Democratic Union Party (PYD).²⁵ Ankara has denied any allegations that Turkey is supporting materially diverse groups allied with al-Qaeda, arguing that any kind of support from Turkey goes to the FSA.²⁶ Western diplomats, however, have repeatedly claimed that Turkey does not discriminate between groups operating under the FSA umbrella, which includes those like Jabhat al-Nusra.²⁷ Moreover, the presence of such groups in Syria has made any prospect of the West supplying the FSA with sophisticated weapons to fight Assad's forces extremely remote.²⁸ Turkey's reliance on these groups to fight against the Assad regime was one more grave miscalculation.

The latest phase of the Syrian tragedy was marked by the ISIS presence and insurgency. The rapid advance of ISIS changed the strategic imperatives and invited more external involvement. On August 8, 2014, Washington announced the deployment of air power against ISIS to protect the northern region of Iraq, assisting the efforts of Iraqi Kurds to face off the threat.²⁹ The US and its allies in the Syrian theatre undertook similar military action in September 2014.³⁰

24 Tocci, 2013, op.cit., p. 2.

25 Idiz, Semih, "Turkey's Syria Policy in Shambles Over Support for Jihadists", 23 July 2013, http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/07/turkey-syria-policy-support-jihadists.html?utm_source=&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=7839#ixzz2ZzZ7FndH.

26 Solmaz, Mehmet. "Turkey continues to be target of blatant 'aiding ISIS' allegations", *Daily Sabah*, 27 August 2014, <http://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2014/08/27/turkey-continues-to-be-target-of-blatant-aiding-isis-allegations>.

27 Idiz, Semih, 2013.

28 Ibid.

29 Sedghi, A. and Arnett, G. "US military Isis air strikes in Iraq: day-by-day breakdown", 3 September 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2014/aug/27/us-military-isis-air-strikes-in-iraq-day-by-day-breakdown>.

30 Cooper, H. and Schmitt, E. "Airstrikes by US and

21 Arango, T. and Saad, H. "Turkey's Parliament Approves Further Military Action Against Syria", *The New York Times*, 4 Oct. 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/05/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

22 Gardner F. "Syria conflict: Chemical attacks kill hundreds", <http://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-23785291/syria-toxic-attacks-kill-hundreds>.

23 Resolution 2118 (2013), S/RES/2118 (2013), United Nations Security Council, 27 September 2013, [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2118\(2013\)](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=S/RES/2118(2013)).

Although the Obama administration ruled out the deployment of ground forces, the decision to aid those forces resisting the ISIS onslaught resulted in a major dilemma for Ankara. Until then, much of the western media and Turkey's main opposition political parties had targeted Ankara for its open-door policy, which allowed jihadist militant groups to cross the Turkish-Syrian borders without restriction.³¹ Moreover, Ankara had been accused of arming and training militants, as well as offering shelter to jihadist insurgents, many of whom joined ISIS.³² Finally, under international pressure and the successful Kurdish resistance to ISIS, the Turkish Parliament granted the government the authority to send troops into Iraq and Syria in order to support the fight against ISIS.³³ On July 24, 2015, four days after a suicide terrorist attack that killed more than 30 Turkish citizens and injured over 100, Turkey launched its first ground and air combat operations against ISIS in Syria and approved the use of the air bases at Incirlik and Diyarbakir for US air strikes.³⁴

For Washington, the new strategic priority was the defeat of ISIS and not the removal of Assad.³⁵ For Ankara, if fighting ISIS was the only way to also fight – or at least neutralize – PKK-affiliated terrorist groups

and “other terror elements in Syria”³⁶ then so be it. The military operation against ISIS coincided with attacks against PKK bases in northern Iraq, breaking a fragile cease-fire that had been in force between Turkey and the PKK since 2013.³⁷ Even though the US also considers the PKK a terrorist organization, they have successfully collaborated with PYD armed groups against ISIS. Yet, it was still Ankara's strategic priority to thwart gains made by the Kurds in Syria, to prevent them from expanding their territory from Tell Abyad to Afrin, and to enforce a safe-zone controlled by Syrian opposition forces supported by Turkey.³⁸ This explains why the Turkish air force did not bomb ISIS in Syria's Euphrates' valley, where it had been fighting PYD militias. Yet, US fighter jets were flying in support of PYD units fighting ISIS near Tell Abyad.³⁹

Enter Russia

The military intervention of Russia further compounded Turkey's frustration with the Syrian crisis. It cancelled whatever hopes Ankara had for the establishment of a safe-zone along the Syrian-Turkish border. Coupled with that, Moscow effectively put an end to Turkey's hope of a Syria without the Assad regime. Both countries have sketched different policies for the future of the Syrian regime. Behind their Middle Eastern strategies there is a logic that could have allowed for convergence. However, they have used different tools and means to pursue their “penetration” strategies in the Middle East: on the one hand, Russia chases penetration over material power and relies on fostering mainly state level relations; on the other hand, Turkey attempts to achieve penetration over religio-cultural affinities and values, and, potentially, through clientelistic effects of

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Allies Hit ISIS Targets in Syria”, 22 September 2014, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/23/world/middleeast/us-and-allies-hit-isis-targets-in-syria.html?_r=0.

31 Solmaz, M. “Turkey continues to be target of blatant ‘aiding ISIS’ allegations”, 27 August 2014, <https://www.dailysabah.com/politics/2014/08/27/turkey-continues-to-be-target-of-blatant-aiding-isis-allegations>.

32 Faiola, A. and Mekhennet, S. “In Turkey, a late crackdown on Islamist fighters”, 12 August 2014, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/how-turkey-became-the-shopping-mall-for-the-islamic-state/2014/08/12/5eff70bf-a38a-4334-9aa9-ae3fc1714c4b_story.html?utm_term=.6cbdebff51d5.

33 Letsch, C. and Borger, J. “Islamic State: Turkish MPs back Iraq-Syria deployment as ISIS advances”, 2 October 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/02/turkey-mps-deployment-iraq-syria-isis>.

34 Sly, L. and DeYoung, K. “Turkey agrees to allow US military to use its base to attack Islamic State”, 23 July 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-agrees-to-allow-us-military-to-use-its-base-to-attack-islamic-state/2015/07/23/317f23aa-3164-11e5-a879-213078d03dd3_story.html?utm_term=.04f56b97700d.

35 Kirisci, K. (2014) “Turkey's ISIL Dilemma: To Fight or Not to Fight”, Brookings, <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/up-front/posts/2014/10/03-turkey-isis-dilemma-kirisci>.

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36 Candar, Cengiz: “Turkey's military actions in Syria will be on its own terms”, *Al-Monitor*, 2 October 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ru/originals/2014/10/turkey-syria-united-states-coalition-vote-military-action.html>.

37 Weise, Z. and Stevenson, C. “Turkish airstrikes against PKK in Iraq throw two-year ceasefire with Kurds into jeopardy”, 25 July 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news-19-6/turkish-airstrikes-against-pkk-in-iraq-throw-two-year-ceasefire-with-kurds-into-jeopardy-10416213.html>.

38 “Erdogan's shift on Islamic State linked to Kurdish gains in Syria”, 26 July 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/07/turkey-attacks-islamic-state-in-syria-pkk-in-northern-iraq.html>.

39 “Awkward Allies”, *The Economist*, August 11, 2015.

its comparative economic advantages.⁴⁰

The downing of the Russian jet in November 2015 served as the highlight to the clash.⁴¹ The most noteworthy consequence of the episode was the opening up to a deepening of Russia's cooperation with the US-led coalition against ISIS and a worsening in Turkish-Russian relations, which lasted for most of 2016.⁴² Just two days after the downing of the Russian jet, President Putin and President Hollande agreed to share information about targets in Syria. Moreover, Putin declared his readiness to work together with the US-led, anti-ISIS coalition.⁴³

Following Russia's appearance, Syria became more than a "proxy war between Syrian parties backed by Iran on the one side, and Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey on the other. The battlefield now included American, Russian and Iranian forces."⁴⁴ *The stakes have far exceeded Ankara's agenda and any action it took could have resulted in the kind of escalation with repercussions far beyond Syria. In the struggle against ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra fighters, Russian and Assad forces have been much more effective and decisive, while Turkish and Arab coalition forces are absent and many of the opposition forces have been penetrated by Jihadist groups.*⁴⁵

40 Han, Ahmet "Pride and Pragmatism: Turkish-Russian Relations after the Su-24M Incident", On Turkey, The German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 2016, P=104, <http://www.gmfus.org/publications/pride-and-pragmatism-turkish-russian-relations-after-su-24m-incident>.

41 Nissenbaum, D., Peker, E. and Marson, J. "Turkey Shoots Down Russian Military Jet", 24 November 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkey-shoots-down-jet-near-syria-border-1448356509>.

42 "Erdogan more isolated than ever on Syria", 29 November 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/syria-turkey-russian-warplane-shot-down-aftermath-erdogan.html#ixzz3synLoyv1>.

43 Roth, A. and Adam, K. "Moscow is ready to coordinate with the West over strikes on Syria, Putin says", 26 November 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/russia-targets-turkish-economy-in-retaliation-for-downing-of-warplane/2015/11/26/b0fb7fac-9433-11e5-a2d6-f57908580b1f_story.html?utm_term=.6e1bbc49e3db.

44 "Erdogan more isolated than ever on Syria", <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/11/syria-turkey-russian-warplane-shot-down-aftermath-erdogan.html#ixzz3synLoyv1>.

45 Ibid.

According to Kadri Gursel,⁴⁶ Moscow's ultimate objectives in Syria were to save Assad. In order to do that, defeating ISIS was essential, and it had the additional advantage of bringing Washington closer to Russian strategic preferences. Russian thinking had it that Turkey's proxy war against Damascus, backed by Riyadh and Doha, was the key factor that could lead to the collapse of the Assad regime and had to be neutralized. If Turkish territory had not been available for the indiscriminate use of jihadis since 2011, the conditions that gave rise to ISIS would have not taken hold in northern Syria, and ISIS would have not grown so assertive.⁴⁷

By the end of 2016, Assad forces had started to control Aleppo. The cooperation between US and Russia to work on a solution for Aleppo was based on a plan to 'wipe out' all rebel groups from the city.⁴⁸ Given this advancement, Erdogan followed a tactic of ensuring that ISIS and the Kurds did not control territories next to Turkey's borders. To do so, Ankara supported the Free Syrian Army militia.⁴⁹

In summer 2016, the July 15 coup changed substantially Turkey's Syria policy.⁵⁰ From that moment onwards, Erdogan began to distance itself from the US and gradually moved closer to Russia. A first implication of this policy shift was Turkey's gradual revision of support toward the anti-Assad armed opposition forces.⁵¹ As Baykent argues, a compromise between Turkey and Russia was evident over the Syrian case: "As Russia tolerated the Turkish military deploying in Syria to prevent the Azaz-Jarablus axis from being dominated by Kurdish forces, Turkey probably accepted not intervening – even on a discursive level – against

46 Gursel, Kadri, "Ankara falls into Moscow's trap", 9 December 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/12/turkey-russia-syria-downing-of-russian-jet-moscow-lure-trap.html#ixzz3vGdDrchg>.

47 Ibid.

48 Yetkin, M. "Trump will find Russia back in the Mideast via Syria", 9 December 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/trump-will-find-russia-back-in-the-mideast-via-syria.aspx?PageID=238&NID=107074&NewsCatID=409>.

49 Ibid.

50 Baykent, Sinan, "Aleppo: Why is the AKP silent?", 16 December 2016, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/aleppo-why-is-the-akp-silent.aspx?pageID=238&nID=107353&NewsCatID=396>.

51 Ibid.

the joint Syrian-Russian operations in Aleppo.”⁵²

Turkish foreign policy makers hope that Putin will aid Turkey to counterbalance the PYD in northern Syria. However, this does not seem a realistic goal for the time being. The signs by early 2017 were not very encouraging for Ankara. For instance, “Turkey failed to convince the United States and Russia to allow it to assume active participation in retaking the Syrian town of Raqqa from ISIS”, on the condition collaboration ended with the PYD⁵³. By March 2017, scenarios to liberate Raqqa gave no active role to Turkey.⁵⁴ Washington deployed US forces between PYD and Turkish lines near Manbij and thus efficiently blocked a planned offensive by Turkey and its Syrian allies.⁵⁵ In addition, the US airlifted the PYD and its allied Arab fighters across the Euphrates, to the strategic Tabqa Dam near Raqqa.⁵⁶ Marginalized, Turkey announced on March 29, 2017 that it ends military operations in Syria.⁵⁷

Turkey has expected a policy shift with the election of Donald Trump. However, “it increasingly looks like Ankara and Washington are heading for a squabble, if not a divorce.”⁵⁸ American support for the PYD remains unquestionable. Erdogan has turned to Russia for alliance: the two sides announced an agreement, in principle, on the delivery to Turkey of the Russian made S-400 air and missile defense system.⁵⁹

On 25 April 2017, Turkish air forces attacked American-

52 Ibid.

53 Yetkin, Murat, “Antalya meet fails to convince US, Russia on Turkish role in Raqqa”, 18 March 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/antalya-meet-fails-to-convince-us-russia-on-turkish-role-in-raqqa.aspx?PageID=238&NID=110960&NewsCatID=409>.

54 Ibid.

55 Trofimov, Y. “Three-Way Contest for Raqqa to Shape Mideast”, 9 March 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/three-way-contest-for-raqqa-to-shape-mideast-1489055407>.

56 Abi-Habib, M. and Abdulrahim, R. “In Raqqa, Signs of Faltering Islamic State Rule”, 28 March 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/in-raqqa-signs-of-faltering-islamic-state-rule-1490726293>.

57 Srivastava, M. and Pitel, L. “Tillerson fails to ease tensions with Turkey”, *Financial Times*, Friday 31 March 2017.

58 Trofimov, Y. “US, Turkey are set on a collision Course”, *The Wall Street Journal*, Friday-Sunday, March 31 – April 2, 2017.

59 “Turkey, Russia clinch agreement on S-400 air defense system deliveries”, 28 April, 2017, <http://tass.com/defense/943772>.

allied Kurdish militias in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁰ Those airstrikes further worsened US-Turkey relations. A crisis over the US partnership with the PYD militias is brewing.⁶¹ Through this way, Ankara wants to give the message of “not without me” to the US in the strongest way possible.⁶² It seems, however, that the US has made its plans based on the PYD presence on the ground.

The Kurdish ‘repercussions’

The Syria crisis has brought to the fore the ‘Kurdish issue’.⁶³ The civil war seemed to be a good opportunity for most of Syria’s Kurds to carve out an autonomous or even sovereign Kurdish region in Syria. This is not acceptable to Ankara; it could provoke other Kurdish separatists to fight for independence.⁶⁴ In 2012, the PKK set up its most powerful operation against Turkish armed forces. Turkey’s foreign policy makers have always believed that Syria’s Kurds supported the PKK, backed-up by the Assad regime ⁶⁵. Under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party (PYD), Syrian Kurds reinforced their military positions across the 911 kilometers of the Turkish-Syrian border. In this context, Iran, Baath, Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) of Iraq came into Turkey’s Kurdish equation.

During the first Gulf War, the perspective of a divided Iraq became one of Turkey’s nightmares in the foreign policy security context. Its main fear was that the division of Iraq would maximize the chances

60 Gordon, M. and Kakol, K. “Turkish Strikes Target Kurdish Allies of US in Iraq and Syria”, 25 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/25/world/middleeast/turkey-kurds-airstrikes-iraq-syria.html>.

61 Malsin, J. “Turkey on a ‘Collision Course’ With the US After Striking Kurdish Militias”, 27 April 2017, <http://time.com/4757298/turkey-united-states-militias-kurdish-ypg/>.

62 Yetkin, M. “US-Turkey collision course”, 30 April 2017, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-turkey-collision-course.aspx?pageID=449&nID=112594&NewsCatID=409>.

63 Pergolizzi, Emanuela (2013) “An Uncertain Road to Peace: Domestic and Regional Challenges in the Turkish-Kurdish Process”, IAI Working Papers 13, Istituto Affari Internazionali. Also, Pusane, O.K. (2014) “Turkey’s Kurdish Opening: Long Awaited Achievements and Failed Expectations”, *Turkish Studies*, vol.15, no.1, pp. 81-99.

64 “Ankara warns Barzani over autonomy in Syria”, *Hurriyet Daily News*, November 3-4, 2012.

65 Paul, Amanda, “Turkey gets tough on Syria”, *Sunday’s Zaman*, 7 October 2012.

for the genesis of an independent Kurdistan. Such a development could bolster Kurdish separatism elsewhere, especially within Turkish territory. However, that fear was substantially reduced by the political-economic relations that the KRG and Turkey had developed over the previous decade.

The positive prospect for intense cooperation with the KRG in the fields of the economy and energy forced President Erdogan to start direct talks with Ocalan and PKK European representatives. That choice was not easy, but it was probably the best option given the regional context that was being formed in the wider Middle East area. The new reality was that Turkey's official opposition to the Assad regime had as an outcome the conjunction of the PKK's military wing, based in Iraqi Kurdistan's Kandil Mountains, and the Tehran-Damascus axis. The PKK found itself to be a valuable actor in the Syrian crisis, coming closer to the Iran-Syria axis with the support of Russia following in 2011. Hence, the PKK was striving to support its own regional interests while becoming a major player for the main actors of the Syrian conflict, i.e. Syria and Iran.

The reinforcement of the PKK created an enigma for Turkish foreign policy: how was it to be dealt with? This new development had left Ankara with one viable option: to work with the PKK by disengaging it from the Tehran-Damascus alliance. While that was enough to say, it was difficult in practice. Turkey had no real influence over the PKK leaders at their Kandil Mountains headquarters adjacent to Iran; only Ocalan had the power to exercise real influence⁶⁶. On 21 March 2013, a cease-fire came into effect. Prospects looked optimistic for a brave breakthrough.⁶⁷

However, these optimistic scenarios for the future of the Turkish Kurdish problem have been further complicated by Turkey's ambiguous policy towards the Syrian crisis and Iraq. On the one hand, Turkey had been supporting the Iraqi Kurds against ISIS in northern Iraq, while on the other, it gave no help to Syrian Kurds against the bloody operations of ISIS

in Syria.⁶⁸ This policy had a straightforward effect on Turkey's attitude towards Turkish Kurds, promising them a viable future through the peace made with the PKK, while thwarting their ambitions for the emergence of an independent Kurdish state.⁶⁹

The Kobane battle in the fall of 2014 marked the end of Turkey's regional desires. The ISIS siege of this predominantly Kurdish town in Syria, and the resistance of its defenders, brought about "the coup de grace against Ankara's Middle Eastern policy".⁷⁰ The takeover of Mosul in Iraq in June 2014 had already altered the strategic situation in Syria and Iraq.⁷¹ On the one hand, the cruelty of ISIS maximized Western support for the survival of the Assad regime. On the other hand, the reluctance of the West to use the military power required to end the conflict was a defining feature for the promotion of the Kurdish fighters against ISIS in the security equation.⁷²

Conclusions

Plagued by serious miscalculations and ideological blindness, Ankara missed the opportunity to become a leader in the Syrian crisis. Six years after the outburst of the conflict, none of its expectations has come to pass while its list of friends has grown very thin. Turkey failed to grasp the regional demographic, religious and political interrelations, with deep sectarian fault-lines, while overestimating its capacity to influence unfolding developments. It also clearly underestimated the resilience of the pro-Assad forces and overestimated

66 Candar, Cengiz, "Turkey's Kurdish Initiative in Regional Context", *Al-Monitor*, 7 April 2013, www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/04/syria-iraq-aspects-turkey.

67 Gunter, M.N. (2014) "The Turkish-Kurdish Peace Process Stalled in Neutral", *Turkish Inside*, vol.16, no.1, pp.19-26.

68 Zaman, Amberin: "Syrian Kurds continue to blame Turkey for backing ISIS militants", *Al-Monitor*, 10 June 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/06/zaman-syria-kurds-rojava-ypg-muslim-pyd-pkk-turkey-isis.html>.

69 Cagaptay, Soner, "Turkey's Kurdish Buffer", *Foreign Affairs*, 1 July 2014, <http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/141612/soner-cagaptay/turkeys-kurdish-buffer>.

70 Ozel, Soli and Behlul Ozkan, "Illusions versus reality", FRIDE Policy Brief no 200, April 2015, p. 6.

71 Ibid.

72 Ibid. Also, Cooper, Helene and Schmitt, Eric "Airstrikes by US and Allies Hit ISIS Targets in Syria", *The New York Times*, 22 September 2014, http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/23/world/middleeast/us-and-allies-hit-isis-targets-in-syria.html?_r=1. Also, Civirolu, Mutlu, "Turkey's passive-aggressive inaction in Kobani is anti-Kurd, anti-peace politics. And it's dangerous", *The Guardian*, 14 October 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/14/turkey-inaction-kobani-kurdish-peace-politics>.

the willingness of the US and Europe to take the risk of forcing the Assad regime from power.⁷³

The three main reasons why Turkey adopted an attitude that was far removed from reality were first, a gross underestimation of the institutional and military resistance of the Assad regime; second, a false reading of the willingness of the West to militarily engage Assad;⁷⁴ and third, the “Sunnification” of Turkish foreign policy.⁷⁵ Ankara also underestimated Moscow’s political support to Assad and the importance it attached to the survival of the regime. Coupled with that, Turkey overestimated the power of the Syrian National Council, Free Syrian Army and other armed groups to fight the Assad regime effectively. Finally, Ankara supported Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS against the criticisms and warnings of the West.⁷⁶

These faulty expectations about the dynamics of the conflict and its future pace trapped Turkish diplomacy into a serious sectarian conflict with its neighbors.⁷⁷ “The ‘zero problems’ policy was always predicated on the flawed assumption that none of the other regional actors had any interests and preference that ran counter to those of Ankara”.⁷⁸ This profound deterioration in the security context in which Turkey has been aspiring to play a major role will, to a significant extent, affect the nature of Turkey’s relations with the US and the West in general.⁷⁹

73 Stephens, Philip, “Turkey has stumbled on the road to Damascus”, *Financial Times*, Friday, 26 October 2012.

74 Ibid.

75 Idiz, Semih, “The ‘Sunnification’ of Turkish Foreign Policy”, 1 March 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/akp-sunni-foreign-policy-turkey-sectarianism.html>.

76 Zeyrek, Deniz, “Turkey’s Syria Policy: Success or Bankruptcy?”, *Radikal*, 26 May 2013.

77 Robins, P. (2013) “Turkey’s “double gravity” predicament: The foreign policy of a newly activist power”, *International Affairs*, vol.89, no.2, pp. 381-397 and Cockburn, Patrick “How Turkey blew its chance to lead this troubled region”, *The Independent*, 29 September 2013.

78 Cornell 2012, op. cit., p. 22.

79 Lesser, Ian (2012) “Turkey, Syria and the Western Strategic Imperative”, Commentary 02, Global Turkey in Europe.



HEZBOLLAH'S LEBANESE STRATEGY IN THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

Marina Calculli

Introduction

Why did Hezbollah intervene in the Syrian war? Not only is this intervention harmful for its political base in Lebanon, but also the likelihood of success in a protracted violent conflict is highly uncertain. Hezbollah officially entered the Syrian war in May 2013, when the Syrian army was losing ground, whilst fighting with rebel forces in al-Qusayr, near the Syrian-Lebanese border. The 'Party of God' has arguably changed the course of that battle in favour of the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and enhanced its presence in Syria ever since, deploying up to 8,000 fighters (perhaps more).¹ This poses a major dilemma for an armed group with limited capabilities that has never engaged in a sustained conflict. Furthermore, the party has been facing a substantial decline in credibility: by engaging in a competition with Sunni armed groups, labelled as 'terrorists' and *takfiriyyn*,² Hezbollah drastically recalibrated its doctrine of resistance (*muqawama*), formerly applied to its exclusive archenemy, Israel, and abandoned its previous claim to Muslim unity (*wahda islamiyya*). All this compromised the image of the 'hero' that the party had built up in the wake of the 2006 July war (*harb tammuz*) against Israel. Therefore, the benefits of Hezbollah's intervention in Syria are not at all obvious, while the costs are clear and immediate. What is also puzzling is that Hezbollah officially announced

its engagement in Syria in 2013, whereas hundreds of Hezbollah fighters had already joined the Syrian war since late 2011, although in a scattered and informal manner. However, the Party, had systematically denied its military engagement in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. It was only with the al-Qusayr battle that it flamboyantly announced its participation to the conflict, shifting from secrecy to publicity.

This paper aims at explaining the logic of Hezbollah's *official* engagement in the Syrian conflict and to shed light on the domestic strategy that the Party has pursued through its intervention in Syria. Existing explanations do not seem to offer clear answers. On the one hand, there are those who consider Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as part and parcel of Iran's sectarian (Shi'a) strategy in the Levant.³ On the other hand, there are those who see Hezbollah's engagement as a necessity, that is an obligation towards its strategic patron-allies, Iran and Syria⁴.

Yet, Hezbollah has resorted to a wide and original range of instruments to justify its intervention in Syria. It would be then reductive to see the Party's role as essentially sectarian. Moreover, although the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah alliance is undeniably key to understanding the Party's strategic involvement in the conflict, this explanation falls short of appreciating Hezbollah's autonomous choices and modalities of engagement in the battleground. In fact, those who give primacy to external actors tend to exaggerate their influence and underestimate local agency,⁵ especially how local players may enable and manipulate external sponsors to pursue their own autonomous agenda.

I content that the style of Hezbollah's intervention in

1 Navad Pollak, 'The transformation of Hezbollah by its involvement in Syria, The Washington Institute of Near East Policy', n.35, August 2016, p.4. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-transformation-of-hezbollah-by-its-involvement-in-syria>.

2 Muslims who claim to be the right interpreters of Islam and accuse others of apostasy – generally referred to Sunni jihadi groups currently fighting in Syria.

3 Philip Smith, 'How Iran is building its Syrian Hezbollah', The Washington Institute, 8 March 2016. <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-iran-is-building-its-syrian-hezbollah>.

4 See for instance: Aram Nerguizian, 'Assessing the consequences of Hezbollah's Necessary War of Choice in Syria', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, June 17, 2013, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-consequences-hezbollahs-necessary-war-choice-syria>.

5 See among others: Ariel I. Ahram (2011) *Proxy Warriors: The Rise and Fall of State-Sponsored Militias* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press); Henning Tamm (2016) 'The Origins of Transnational Alliances: Rulers, Rebels, and Political Survival in the Congo Wars,' *International Security*, vol.41, no.1, pp:147–181.

Syria rather points to the Party's domestic strategy of survival within the Lebanese power-sharing system. More specifically, the publicity of Hezbollah's engagement has been meant to deter its rivals from escalating the domestic conflict and force them to negotiate a new political status quo. I explain this by placing Hezbollah's intervention in Syria into the context of the Party's public displays of violence. I content that Hezbollah's demonstrations of force have been primarily geared towards instantiating the Party's claim to an active political role in Lebanon and resist rival attempts to weaken and disband it. Hezbollah's violent engagement in Syria – this paper shows – is no exception.

To make my argument, I first locate Hezbollah within the “axis of refusal” to shed light on the strategic value as well as on the contradictions of the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah's alliance. I then analyse the actual gains of Hezbollah in both Syria and Lebanon since 2013. Here I show that Hezbollah's intervention in Syria has served primarily to expand its political role in Lebanon. Finally, I discuss more broadly the Party's strategy of legitimizing its military engagement in Syria. By recalibrating the notion and doctrine of *muqawama* to the fight against Sunni jihadi groups in Syria and the Middle East, Hezbollah has emerged as a major ‘status quo’ defender. By so doing, it has strengthened the alliance with conservative forces against newfound attempts to neutralize it.

Hezbollah's place within the “axis of refusal”

There is a general tendency in the literature to treat Hezbollah as a non-state actor, with a Lebanese grip and a regional standing. By emphasizing the importance of its ideological commitment to the Iranian Islamic revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's *wilayat al-faqih* (the “doctrine of the legislator”), some analysts and scholars essentially portray Hezbollah as a proxy of Iran.⁶ Others shed light on transnational Shi'ite

identity in the Iran-Syria-Hezbollah “axis of refusal” (*mahwar al-mumana'a*) [or “resistance movement” (*harakat al-muqawama*)].⁷ Seen from this angle, Hezbollah's participation in the Syrian conflict would be a combination of duty towards regional patrons and sectarianism. There is a palpable element of interaction between structure and agency in this position, as Hezbollah's agency is analysed in relation to structural constraints.⁸ But whilst we know that the party is vitally dependent on Iranian supply of weapons and funding, it also shows autonomy in providing social services,⁹ construction of a religious sphere,¹⁰ and partaking in Lebanese politics since 1992.¹¹ As Hokayem put it, “the idea of Hezbollah as a client of Iran and Syria has become obsolete due to the power base the Shi'ite group has nurtured and expanded in Lebanon”.¹²

After the 2003 invasion of Iraq and the 2011 conflict in Syria, sectarian self-victimization, often propagated by opportunistic political elites, has been a trigger of conflict and transnational feelings of belonging to a community under existential threat.¹³ Yet, it is

7 Seyyed Vali Reza Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, 1st ed. (New York: Norton, 2006).

8 Karim Knio (2013) “Structure, Agency And Hezbollah: A Morphogenetic View,” *Third World Quarterly* vol.34, no.5, pp.856–872; Lina Khatib, Dina Matar, and Atef Alshaer (2014) *The Hizbullah Phenomenon: Politics and Communication* (London: Hurst & Company), pp.17–24.

9 Rola El Hussein (2010) “Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol.31, no.5, pp.803–815; Mona Harb (2010) *Le Hezbollah À Beyrouth (1985-2005). De La Banlieue À La Ville* (Harmattan); Mona Harb and Reinoud Leenders (2005) “Know Thy Enemy: Hizbullah, ‘terrorism’ and the Politics of Perception,” *Third World Quarterly*, vol.26, no.1, pp.173–197; Augustus R. Norton (2009) *Hezbollah: A Short History; with a New Afterword by the Author*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, N.J.: Oxford: Princeton University Press).

10 Lara Deeb (2013) *Leisurely Islam: Negotiating Geography and Morality in Shi'ite South Beirut*, Princeton Studies in Muslim Politics (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press).

11 Magnus Ranstorp (1998) “The Strategy and Tactics of Hizballah's Current ‘Lebanonization Process,’” *Mediterranean Politics*, vol.3, no.1, pp.103–134; Norton, *Hezbollah*.

12 Emile El-Hokayem (2007) “Hizballah and Syria: Outgrowing the Proxy Relationship,” *The Washington Quarterly*, vol.30, no.2, pp.35.

13 Marina Calcutti (2016) ‘Middle East Security: Conflict and Securitization of Identities’, in Louise Fawcett

6 See, for instance: Matthew Levitt, *A Proxy for Iran*, The Washington Institute, July 14, 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/a-proxy-for-iran>. (accessed August 20, 2016); see also: Matthew Levitt (2013) *Hezbollah: The Global Footprint of Lebanon's Party of God* (London: CHurst & CoPublishers Ltd).

questionable whether these transnational bonds are breaking state borders. They rather seem to coexist and compete with national ties. Historically, political Shi'ism has been adapted in each country to the peculiar domestic political context. The perception of an existential threat stemming from Sunni jihadi groups, such as the Islamic State, may have fostered a pan-Shi'ite feeling of victimhood (parallel to a pan-Sunni sentiment of oppression by the Shi'ites). However, national identities show surprising resilience, amidst conflict and fragmentation.¹⁴ In addition to this, Twelver Shi'ites of Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Afghanistan do not necessarily believe that the Alawites (to whom Bashar al-Asad belongs) can be considered as part of the Shi'ite faith community. Contestation of the Shi'ite identity of the Alawites was curbed in the 1980s as a result of Syria's strategic alignment with Iran.

It is also noteworthy that the relationship between Hezbollah and Syria sharply differs from the one between Hezbollah and Iran, and the Party itself has tried to avoid sectarian characterizations with regard to its engagement in Syria. For instance, the member of Parliament (MP) and intellectual Hassan Fadlallah recalled in his writings the fierce rivalry between Syria and the Party during the civil war, and the repression of Hezbollah's activists by Syria in 1993.¹⁵ Fadlallah also attributes the opening of a new era of collaboration with Damascus to the shift of Hezbollah's dossier from the supervision of former Syrian Foreign Minister Abdul Halim Khaddam to that of Farouq al-Shara.¹⁶ Pragmatism, therefore, seems to be more relevant than actual religious bounds. Incidentally, these bonds have anyway not prevented rifts and rivalries at different points in time.

(ed.), *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), pp.219-235.

14 Roschanack Shaery-eisenlohr (2007) "Postrevolutionary Iran And Shi'i Lebanon: Contested Histories Of Shi'i Transnationalism," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, vol.39, no.2, pp.271-289; Laurence Louër (2008) *Transnational Shia Politics: Religious and Political Networks in the Gulf*, CERI Series in Comparative Politics and International Studies (London: Hurst in association with the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, Paris), pp.225-63.

15 For instance, in 1993, Syria repressed and killed Hezbollah activists protesting against the Oslo accords, of which Syria was part of.

16 Hassan Fadlallah (2014) *Hezbollah w dawla fi Lubnan* [Hezbollah and the State in Lebanon] (Sharka al-matbu'at liltuzy' w al-nashar, Beirut), pp.118-123.

Yet, although corroborated by the production of Shi'a transnational symbolism – such as the transformation of the Sayyida Zaynab mosque in Damascus into a shrine for Shi'ite pilgrims – Shi'ites from all over the Middle East, including the Lebanese, fall short of recognizing a transnational identification as superior to the national/local one. In Lebanon, for instance, whereas the Shi'ite community has overall supported the 2013 Hezbollah's intervention in Syria, civilians belonging to the so-called 'society of resistance' (*mujtama al-muqawama*) – Hezbollah's base – have recurrently questioned the "military adventure" (*mughamara askariyya*) in a "foreign country" (*balad ajnaby*) and even organized closed-door workshops to discuss the appropriateness of the Party's intervention in Syria¹⁷.

Moreover, although many Hezbollah supporters justify the Party's engagement in Syria as a "sacred defense" (*al-difa' al-muqaddas*) of the Shi'a community, they do not feel ideologically affiliated with Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who is largely seen as a secularist and corrupted ruler – far from the ethics of Hezbollah, which is in their view a Party with "clean hands" (*ayad nadifa*)¹⁸. In this regard, they do not consider Hezbollah's intervention in Syria as a defense of Assad, but rather as a strategic necessity aimed at countering the influence of Gulf powers, especially Saudi Arabia, and Gulf-sponsored Sunni armed groups in the Levant. They perceive the Gulf states as obsessed with the Shi'ites, and they believe that the Gulf states' regional policy seeks to marginalize the Shi'ites, if not erase them from earth. Episodes, such as the execution of the prominent Shi'ite cleric Nimr al-Nimr in January 2016, are echoed by mass protests in the whole Middle East.¹⁹ In a similar vein, Saudi war on the Houthis in Yemen, started in 2015, is seen as merely driven by anti-Shi'ite sentiments. In an unprecedented move, during the 2015 celebration of the 'Ashura,²⁰ in Dahiye (Beirut), the crowd gathered around Hassan Nasrallah

17 Author's conversations with Hezbollah's electoral supporters in Beirut, Bint Jbeil, Hermel, Srafa, Tyr (15-26 August 2015). 18 out of 20 people explicitly pointed to the Syrian conflict as "foreign".

18 Author's conversations with Hezbollah's electoral supporters in Beirut (September 14, 2016).

19 cleric <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35213244>.

20 When the Shi'ites remember the martyr of Husseyn.

started chanting “death to al-Saud” (*al-mut lil-Sa’ud*).²¹ Whereas all this may point to sectarianism, these facts neither foster inter-Shi’ite solidarity, nor they smooth intra-Shi’ite rivalries and competition. For instance, the other Lebanese Shi’a party AMAL has not actively supported Hezbollah’s participation in the Syrian war in 2011, and the competition between AMAL and Hezbollah has grown ever since.²²

Finally, it is noteworthy that Hezbollah’s intervention in the conflict sparked controversy amongst the Syrian army and intelligence. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Syrian generals have hardly accepted Hezbollah taking the command in security operations and training SAA officers and Special Forces in guerrilla warfare. Not surprisingly, there has been evidence of clashes between Syrian officers and Hezbollah fighters along the battle of Aleppo.²³ In 2015, a strong debate within the Syrian establishment on the expanding role of Hezbollah and Iran in Syria even led to the killing of Rustom Ghazali, a Syrian top intelligence figure.²⁴ Put differently, Hezbollah’s presence on the Syrian battleground has been and remains highly controversial and contested from both a Lebanese and a Syrian standpoint. The fact that foreign state and non-state military forces most probably outnumbered SAA officers on active duty in 2016²⁵ only testifies to the weakness of the Assad regime, and the indispensability of external military support.

Yet, the evidence provided in this section suggests that Damascus did not dictate the terms and the limits of the Party’s intervention. Most crucially, whereas Hezbollah’s intervention was negotiated with Iran and Syria, external sponsoring and the idea of Hezbollah as a “proxy” does not explain why in May 2013 the ‘Party of God’ announced its participation in the Syrian war;

hence, breaking with the past two years (2011–2013) in which its belligerent engagement in Syria had been informal and publicly denied. Is this a sign of a major transformation of Hezbollah from a domestic into a regional force?

Is Hezbollah going regional?

Hezbollah has led prominent military operations in al-Quseyr, Aleppo, Zabadani, Homs, Qalamun and Quneitra.²⁶ In addition, the Party has rapidly adapted to new types of warfare, especially long-distance fighting, driving tanks and coordinating with (Russian) airpower²⁷ – something unprecedented for an armed group exclusively used to guerrilla warfare in Southern Lebanon against Israel. Also, the Party has trained and coordinated with Syrian militias, that increasingly imitate Hezbollah’s ideological and structural frame. These militias mainly recruit in the villages of Nubl and Zahara, where the majority of the population is Twelver Shi’a.²⁸ Moreover, new reserve battalions in both Syrian and Lebanon have been created, also recruiting Sunnis and Christians.²⁹ Whereas all this testifies to an extension of Hezbollah’s grip, possibly indicating that the Party has been transformed into a *de facto* “conventional force” increasingly active in multiple battlefields,³⁰ there is no clear evidence of a *permanent* regionalization of Hezbollah, nor of its detachment from the political and social Lebanese dimension.

Quite on the contrary, from 2011 to 2016, the Party has unprecedentedly expanded its political hold on Lebanese institutions. Incidentally, Hezbollah has calibrated its presence in Syria to the strategic needs hitherto, withdrawing its fighters during calm periods.³¹

21 <http://janoubia.com/2015/10/24/دعوى-ل-ال-توكل-اغتاة-ال-كثير-م-ال-توكل-ل-دب/>.

22 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/reportsfeatures/566733-the-not-so-cold-war-between-amal-movement-and-hezbollah/>.

23 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/567106-hezbollah-clashes-with-syria-regime-troops-activists/>.

24 Marina Calculi, ‘The Iran-Russia alignment in Syria’, Aspenia online (October 26, 2015), <https://www.aspeninstitute.it/aspenia-online/article/iran-russia-alignment-syria>.

25 <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2016/11/26/hizballahs-nasrallah-holds-meeting-with-assad-on-syria-lebanon-border>.

26 <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-3075681/Hezbollah-leads-fight-strategic-Syrian-mountain-range.html>.

27 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/thanks-in-no-small-part-to-russia-hezbollah-is-now-a-full-fledged-army/>.

28 <http://www.joshualandis.comblogsyrrianhezbollah-militias-nubl-zahara/>.

29 <https://now.mmediamelbenreportsfeatures/565936-hezbollahs-recruiting-of-sunnis-in-the-bekaa>.

30 <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/567516-hezbollahs-army-in-syria-is-good-news>.

31 <https://now.mmedia.melbenNewsReports/566739-hezbollah-withdrawing-fighters-from-syria-report>.

More saliently, the Party seems aware of the fact that “the burdens of the war are sustainable in the short run, but Hezbollah has not unlimited resources”.³² The Party’s social base is also very sensitive to the sustainability of Hezbollah’s welfare, which has proven to affect popular support for military operations. Anecdotal accounts suggest that Hezbollah’s electoral base is increasingly worried that the military engagement in Syria will affect their economic stability, and is waiting for a full withdrawal from Syria.³³ After December 2015, Hezbollah was hit by the US ‘International Financing Prevention Act of 2015’, which froze bank accounts and assets likely to be destined to the Party. All this piled up with the already planned cancellation or postponement of different infrastructural projects in Dahiye and South Lebanon by the construction company Jihad al-Bina’.³⁴ As a result, during summer 2016, amidst a massive and costly military campaign on Aleppo, Hezbollah disposed of an increase in pensions and salaries, following widespread social disappointment with previous cuts.³⁵ Otherwise, the culture of martyrdom cannot suffice as a viable symbolic glue for the rather narrow Shi’a Lebanese community. Finally, if the Syrian regime wins the war – what Hezbollah is fighting for – it is unlikely that it will foresee a newfound “Syrian role” for the party, so far considered no more than an “allied force” (*al-quwat al-halifat* – pl.).

On the one hand, Hezbollah decided to join the Syrian conflict for a clear strategic reason: a fall of the Syrian regime, which seemed incumbent in May 2013, would have hindered the feasibility of Hezbollah’s weapons procurement. By intervening in Syria, Hezbollah managed to alter the power distribution within the “axis”, improving the position of the ‘resistance’, and

finally renegotiating the terms of Syrian presence and manoeuvring in Lebanon. However, Hezbollah’s military gains have not produced enduring advantages in Syria and the Middle East. Yet, the strategic publicity of its intervention in 2013 – the visible display of force, coordination and adaptation to the new warfare – can be better explained as part of a domestic calculation, meant to deter rivals from engaging in formal and informal actions to harm the *muqawama*, secure and enhance Hezbollah’s positioning within Lebanese State institutions. To understand this move, we need to place the 2013 intervention in Syria within the wider context of Hezbollah’s material and symbolic historical displays of force since 2000, and the political meaning of these manifestations of force within the Lebanese corporate power-sharing system.

Hezbollah’s Lebanese strategy in Syria

In a speech announcing that Hezbollah was ready to join the fighting in Syria, in April 2013, Hassan Nasrallah argued that 30,000 Lebanese Christians and Muslims living on the Syrian-Lebanese borderland were being threatened by Islamist groups who were fighting in al-Qusayr against the Syrian Army.³⁶ In another speech,³⁷ on May 25, Nasrallah referred to the insufficiency of State defence facing the Israeli and other regional threats to their borders. The lack of the LAF (Lebanese Armed Forces)’s military equipment is attributed to a US veto, based on the concern that a strong Lebanese army would threaten Israel. It is exactly such a veto, in Hezbollah’s view, that justifies the necessity of the ‘resistance’:

What has the Lebanese State done to face potential perils that may occur in the region on the Israeli side?...Let’s start with the Army. Everybody wants a strong Army capable to defend the nation...What if we provide the Army with capabilities and strengths, which enable it to deter the enemy?...There is no answer...Yet, some in Lebanon prepared to confront all future Israeli threats...A part

32 Author’s interview with Hezbollah’s MP, Ali Fayad (Beirut, 3 May 2015).

33 Author’s conversations with Hezbollah’s supporters (Srafa and Tyr, 8-9 September 2016).

34 In my conversations with supporters of Hezbollah (Beirut, 5-6 September 2016), six people reported to me that they were aware of infrastructural projects that had been budgeted by Hezbollah and then canceled.

35 In conversation I had with four people, they declared their salary depends on Hezbollah; all declared they had received more money, and this was not only a random, but a structural measure taken by the party in June-July 2016 (Beirut, 6 September 2016).

36 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cvNXVGOZYUI&t=1030s>.

37 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wHHnYwr2044>.

of the Lebanese people made it, namely the resistance. I do not mean only the resistance of Hezbollah...everyone who made an effort in this direction...After 30 years of accumulated experience... Lebanon today possesses this power. This power – the resistance with all its factions – defeated Israel [in 2006].³⁸

In the same speech, Nasrallah goes on to talk about what he perceives as the new incumbent threat upon Lebanon: the *takfiri* threat. Here, he dismisses sectarianism whilst forging the image of the party as the protector of religious pluralism (*al-ta'dudiyya*):

Today those who are fighting in Syria are an extension to the...organization of the Islamic State in Iraq. Ask the Sunni in Iraq... They did not attack only Shi'ite mosques...and Christian churches. No!...Most of these suicide operations targeted Iraqis from all sects...Do you know what is the problem with the takfiri mentality? They label others as unbelievers for the most trivial reasons... whoever takes part in parliamentary elections is an unbeliever... no matter whether he is a Sunni, a Shi'ite or a Christian...O Lebanese people!...I am a brother who gives you an advise...Lebanon will be afflicted by this epidemics. Let's be logical. Put factionalism and sectarianism aside. This is a huge peril...We are not approaching the issue from a Shi'ite or Sunni perspective as some try to accuse us. We are rather approaching the issue from a perspective which sees both Muslims and Christians threatened in the same way³⁹.

The discourse of Nasrallah marked a major change from the two previous years, when Hezbollah had denied the presence of its fighters on the Syrian front. From 2011 to 2013, Lebanese politics had been characterized by an exacerbation of the rivalry between the '14 March' and the '8 March' – the two blocs emerged from the political reshuffle that followed the end of the Syrian protectorate (*al-wikala al-suriyya*) in 2005. When popular protests started to challenge the regime of Bashar al-Assad in Syria, in 2011, the '14

March' sharply voiced its support to the Syrian street. The Hezbollah-led '8 March', on the contrary, jumped on defending the legitimacy of Assad, mainly adopting Damascus' narrative of a 'foreign plot against Syria, masked as a popular revolution'.

The '14 March', led by Sa'ad Hariri, hoped to witness a rapid regime change in Syria thus also an end of the long-standing influence that Assad exerted on Lebanon, despite the withdrawal of Syrian troops from the country in 2005⁴⁰. Relatedly, the '14 March' expected that its main rival in Lebanon, Hezbollah, would be weakened and its armed wing dismantled. '14 March' politicians had, at different points in time, asked Hezbollah to put its weapons under the authority of the State and called for and supported international pressure on the Party. Hezbollah adopted a set of preventive measures to counteract rival attempts to marginalize the Party. In January 2011, three months before the Syrians sparked off street protests, Hezbollah ministers resigned from cabinet. As a consequence, the Hariri-led government collapsed. The move came as a response to Hariri's backing of the UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL), which had signalled to hold proves of Hezbollah's involvement in the assassination of Rafiq Hariri, Sa'd father, in 2005.⁴¹ A 6-month long political void opened up in Lebanon, until Nagib Mikati, a businessman from the northern city of Tripoli, was nominated Prime Minister. In July 2011, amidst the exacerbation of the Syrian regime repression and the transition from peaceful to violent mobilization of the Syrian protest, the STL issued an indictment against four Hezbollah members, to be executed by the Lebanese Internal Security Forces (ISF). Verbal anger escalated between the '14 March' and the '8 March', but the STL indictment was not eventually followed by any formal measure against the four Hezbollah members. Yet, the '14 March' was still confident that Assad had his days counted, and a regime change in Damascus would have boosted the power of Hariri and allowed Saudi Arabia to exert more influence in Lebanon and the Arab Levant, thus to diminish the role of Iran and Hezbollah.

38 Author's translation.

39 *Idem*.

40 The withdrawal put an end to 29 years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon, widely considered as an 'occupation'.

41 <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast.com/2011/01/2011112151356430829.html>.

The political polarization was only further exacerbated, however, since the conflict in Syria escalated and Assad showed surprising resilience. Lebanese citizens from the two camps joined the Syrian conflict on both sides, although Hezbollah's capacities largely outnumbered those of their rivals. The turning point occurred in April 2013, when PM Mikati resigned from office and Tammam Salam was nominated as the new head of cabinet. Amidst this political turmoil, Hezbollah changed its strategy and decided to formally enter the Syrian conflict. The decision came at a moment in which the '14 March' was expecting a significant weakening of the SAA's military force, whilst calling for Assad to step down. Not surprisingly, Hezbollah's decision to enter Syria was enormously contested and criticized by the '14 March' politicians and supporters. Salafi actors voiced their sympathy for the Syrian rebellion and mobilized against the Shi'a Party. For instance, the emergence of the 'Abdullah Azzam' Brigades and a group known as 'Free Sunni Command' in Ba'albek, an area of the Lebanese Biqa' Valley mainly inhabited by Shi'ites and Christians, sparked panic amongst the population. Also, in Sunni-populated areas, such as Tripoli or Tareq Jadida in Beirut, sympathy for the Salafi jihadi group Jabhat al-Nusra (since 2016, renamed Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and Ha'yat Tahrir al-Sham) enhanced sectarian hatred, which polarized the country even further.

Hezbollah exploited these fears at a moment in which it was itself concerned with a possible fall of Bashar al-Assad, which would have constructed a momentum of vulnerability for the Party, and encouraged its political rivals in Lebanon to raise the stake and undermine Hezbollah's political future. Therefore, the Party decided to publically intervene in Syria. The decision not to keep a low profile in the al-Qusayr battle, but to flamboyantly display its force, has not just been a matter of necessity but rather a strategic move to deter its Lebanese rivals from escalating the rift in both Syria and Lebanon, and to freeze the status quo to produce more favourable conditions to politically renegotiate its role and viability. This strategic move can be only understood if we place Hezbollah's violence in Syria in the wider picture of Hezbollah's displays of force.

Hezbollah's search for legitimacy

Hezbollah's use of violence has been always controversial and contested by Lebanese and international actors, which have recurrently voiced for the Party's disbandment and subjection to the authority of the Lebanese State. Yet, Hezbollah employs its weapons to mainly claim a political role and normalization, and to protect its position within the Lebanese power-sharing system. This is the very logic of Hezbollah's use and display of violence and continuation of its alliance with Iran and Syria. Accordingly, in order to resist marginalization, Hezbollah needs to create and reproduce legitimacy for its violence, amidst growing and renewing contestation of its military role in Lebanon.⁴² The Party frames its action under the formula '*al-jaysh, al-sha'ab, al-muqawama*' ('the Army, the People, the Resistance') that all Lebanese governments have adopted from 1992 to 2011.

Not surprisingly, any possible change in the status quo, which is liable to undermine the validity of this formula, represents an opportunity for Hezbollah's rivals to delegitimize the role of the 'resistance'. In such critical moments, Hezbollah tends to display its violence in order to construct, adjust and force the other actors of the Lebanese power-sharing system to renegotiate a new domestic status quo. In order to understand the logic of Hezbollah's display of force in Syria from 2013 onwards, we need to decode the Party's perception of an incumbent challenge to its own survival, by placing Hezbollah's public intervention in Syria along a series of momentous tensions between contesters and proponents of the legitimacy of the 'resistance' Lebanon.

In 1992, Hezbollah was mainly perceived as an "uninvited newcomer" in the Lebanese confessional power-sharing system, challenging all other members thereof, including the Shi'a party AMAL. At that time, however, Syria exploited Hezbollah's military wing

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42 Marina Calculi, (II) legitimate violence and the State in Lebanon. Understanding the liaison between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army, paper presented at the George Washington University, 27 February 2016, https://www.academia.edu/30200309/_Il_legitimate_violence_and_the_State_understanding_the_liaison_between_Hezbollah_and_the_Lebanese_Army_.

in southern Lebanon,⁴³ whilst supporting AMAL and limiting Hezbollah's participation in politics. A crucial moment of contestation of Hezbollah's political role occurred when Israel withdrew from southern Lebanon, thus also encouraging Hezbollah's rivals to claim that, with the end of occupation, the Party's reason to exist had ended relatedly. After 9/11 2001, in the framework of the US war on terror, Hezbollah's Lebanese rivals coordinated with international actors in order to enhance the pressure on the 'resistance', through the 'Syrian Accountability Act and Lebanese Sovereignty Restoration Act' (SALSRA) of 2003 and UN Security Council Resolutions 1559 (2004), calling for the Party to submit its arms under the authority of the State.

After the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and the end of Syrian military presence in the country in 2005, the establishment of a Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) was perceived as a further instrument to weaken Hezbollah. The 2006 war with Israel, de facto provoked by the Party, turned into a stunning opportunity for Hezbollah to renew the legitimacy of its weapons and their functionality for the security of Lebanon. The July war (*harb tammuz*) offered to the Party the narrative of a "victory"⁴⁴, through which Hezbollah informed a new discourse to morally justify its violence. In Hezbollah's view, the absence of military engagement of regular Arab armies against Israel – and especially the under-equipment of the Lebanese Army – was adequate to justify the continuation of Hezbollah's armed resistance. The popularity of the Party spread in the whole Arab and Muslim world, giving the Party a moral allure and a deterrent towards its political rivals at once.

A further occasion to delegitimize Hezbollah occurred in May 2008, when the government, led by the '14 March' politician Fuad Seniora, outlawed the communication network of Hezbollah. The Party considered its communication network vital to counteract Israeli attacks against the Lebanese territories, and perceived the government's decision as

43 Syria used Hezbollah in south Lebanon in order to balance Israel.

44 Although the war ended without winners or losers, Hezbollah claimed that its resistance prevented Israel from annexing part of Lebanon – as explicitly expressed by the Israeli government at the beginning of the war.

a 'declaration of war'. Therefore, it decided to occupy downtown Beirut, in a major demonstration of force, which proved Hezbollah's military superiority. All this led anti-Hezbollah parties to make a step back and renegotiate the relationship between Hezbollah and the State in the 2008 Doha agreement, in which Hezbollah obtained that a Government decision should have the support of two-thirds of the cabinet, thus providing a grouping of 'one-third plus one' the power to veto. Such formal measure has been vital for Hezbollah to block decisions taken against the *muqawama* after 2008⁴⁵. The new Cabinet that emerged from the Doha agreement recognized the formula *al-jaysh, al-sh'ab, al-muqawama*, thus reiterating the formal recognition of Hezbollah's weapons within (and not outside) the framework of the State.

Finally, when in 2013 Hezbollah officially entered Syria, the Party was obviously trying to prevent the fall of a major strategic ally, namely the Assad regime. Yet, the Party rhetorically framed its intervention as a preventive war against 'terrorist groups' and a way to protect Lebanon and the Lebanese border from *takfiri* infiltrations. The visibility of the collaboration between the Army and Hezbollah against Da'esh and other jihadi groups [especially around the *jurd* (outskirts) of the border-town 'Arsal, in the northern part of the Biq'a valley] is part and parcel of the Party's strategy to refashion a moral justification for its military role in Lebanon.

In so doing, Hassan Nasrallah has emphasized the national role of Hezbollah, crafting a renewed doctrine of complementarity (*al-takamul*) between the *muqawama* and the Lebanese Army as the only formula to protect Lebanon from external threats.⁴⁶ More crucially, this strategy has allowed the Party to reframe or strengthen a political alliance with Christian political parties and actors in Lebanon, against rival

45 Including the aforementioned Hariri's endorsement of the STL indictment against the party, which led to the government collapse in 2011.

46 Marina Calcutti, (II)legitimate violence and the State in Lebanon. Understanding the liaison between Hezbollah and the Lebanese Army, paper presented at the George Washington University, 27 February 2016, https://www.academia.edu/30200309/_II_legitimate_violence_and_the_State_understanding_the_liaison_between_Hezbollah_and_the_Lebanese_Army.

Sunnis. Amongst them, there is especially the Leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, Michel 'Aoun. The Free Patriotic Movement perceives Hezbollah's action against Sunni jihadi groups as a defense of Christian existence and religious pluralism in the Arab Levant and of the Lebanese State more broadly. Their discourse has therefore refashioned the perception of Hezbollah amongst a great part of the Christian community in Lebanon.

As stated in the previous section, Hezbollah capitalized on the political vacuum and stagnation that since 2011 lingered over and exacerbated to the point that, when former President Michel Suleiman ended his mandate in 2014, the Parliament (that had itself illegitimately renewed its own mandate) was unable to elect a president. The Presidential vacuum finally ended in October 2016, with the election of Michel 'Aoun, who openly supports the complementarity between Hezbollah and the Army and does consider Hezbollah as 'part of the national defence of Lebanon'.⁴⁷ By further associating itself to Christian conservative forces, Hezbollah has reinvented its security role for Lebanon in order to accommodate its interests within the new geopolitical conditions of the Arab Levant and the region, and continue to play a vital political role in Lebanon.

Conclusions

Whereas the decision to intervene in Syria was certainly negotiated with Iran and Syria, in 2013 Hezbollah entered the conflict at its own terms and conditions. The Party has used the Syrian momentum in order to construct a novel discourse to justify the necessity of its weapons for Lebanon's security. Such discourse was directed at both its Lebanese supporters and detractors, in order to reproduce, renegotiate and enhance its political role in the country. Therefore, Hezbollah has been able to improve its political position in Lebanon not simply in spite of its foreign adventurism in Syria, but precisely through it.

The military action of the Party is informed by two inherent limitations: first, as a Lebanese actor and militia, the Party can potentially maximize its power

within Lebanon, whereas overstretching its regional ambitions is likely to be self-harming in the long run. Secondly, there exists an intimate link between Hezbollah's military and political wings. More specifically, Hezbollah uses its weapons not only as a means to exert its political violence, but also as way to claim recognition as a political party.

From this perspective, Hezbollah's public display of force in Syria in 2013 was meant to deter its domestic political rivals from escalating the conflict against the resistance. By inscribing Hezbollah's intervention in Syria within a series of cyclical demonstrations of force, this paper aimed at shedding light on the logic of Hezbollah's violence, which serves to negotiate and secure its political viability in Lebanon, rather than expand its regional influence.

47 <http://yalibnan.com/2017/02/18/aoun-assures-critics-that-hezbollah-would-be-bound-by-the-national-defense-strategy/>.



CONCLUSIONS

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Six years after the start of the Syrian crisis, the future of the country is uncertain. There is no evidence that a viable solution will be found that produces a fair and peaceful settlement of the conflict. On the contrary, the continuation of chaos and bloodshed is more likely to be sustained. Hence, what went wrong and is there any hope for a peaceful settlement of the dispute?

There are many reasons for the failure of efforts to deal with the Syrian crisis. In first place is the wider strategic environment and the realities in the Middle East that have to a great extent formed the course of events in the Syrian crisis. In Iraq, the withdrawal of US troops has provoked a fragile situation; Jordan, although it has effectively faced the wave of Arab transitions, has done so without seriously addressing some of the key economic and political challenges of the country. In Lebanon and Palestine, powerless governments and authorities are continually challenged; Egypt, one of the cornerstones of the once familiar architecture of regional security, has gone from autocracy, to constitutional theocracy and back to autocracy. Iran has not abandoned its nuclear aspirations, but it is gradually regarded as a useful ad hoc partner in countering the 2014 jihadist onslaught in Syria and Iraq. Turkey, the other critical underpinning of American post Second World War strategic planning, had its foreign policy under the Justice and Development Party (AKP) contaminated by approaches with a strong sectarian flavor, blinded by doctrinal inflexibility and illusions of great power grandeur; thus, damaging its credibility in Washington and European, Eastern Mediterranean and Middle Eastern capitals. And, finally, in Syria, the civil war has claimed a death toll too high to contemplate and a refugee problem that no one has the courage to face, while the reappearance of Putin's Russia, following the de facto annexation of Crimea, has raised the stakes.¹

1 Khatib, L., Eaton, T., Haid, H., Hamidi, I., Kodmani, B., Phillips, C., Quilliam, N., and Sinjab, L. (2017) *Western Policy Towards Syria: Applying Lessons Learnt*, Chatham House, Middle East and North Africa Programme, March 2017, London.

This e-book has attempted to give some answers to the questions raised by looking at the strategies of major international and regional powers in the Syrian civil war. One of the basic observations is that almost all powers grossly miscalculated the realities and evolutions in Syria as well as in the wider Middle East. First, the predictions were wrong about how long Assad would last and what he was capable of doing. Second, the international community, especially the US and Turkey, also miscalculated Assad's isolation. Washington and Ankara truly believed that Assad's supporters would only provide moral support and the West, under their leadership, would easily topple the regime. Yet, Iran turned out to be extremely generous when it came to providing military and economic support to Assad. Third, the arrival of new players in the dynamics of the conflict, such as Russia, further contributed to the endurance of the Assad regime and fundamentally altered the balance of power. Lastly, with the addition ISIS, the continuing conflict between the regime's armed forces and the opposing rebels has become even more complex, with an explosive triangle of different hostile groups fighting each other.²

Yet, there is more to it. The election of Donald Trump in the US will certainly change US foreign policy strategy in the Middle East and will determine a new approach toward the settlement of the Syrian crisis. It is not clear how Trump will deal with Russia, Turkey and other major powers, such as Saudi Arabia, Israel, Iraq and Iran, regarding the Syrian conflict. What is clear is that the international community, under the auspices of the US, cannot appease the geopolitical storms in the Middle East, while regional powers, such as Turkey and/or Russia—or anyone else for that matter—are not able to assume this role. It is certain that Syria has no good prospects. The struggle has revealed the deep divisions between Sunni, Alawite, Kurd and other smaller minority groups. The war has affected and threatens to gravely destabilize the fragile status quo in Lebanon and possibly elsewhere. Worse, it has accentuated the Sunni-Shiite antagonisms within the Islamic world and it has fueled the confrontation between extremists and

2 Tomlinson, Lucas, "Old rivalries keeping Turkey on sidelines of Syria fight, analysts say", *Fox News*, 16 October 2014, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2014/10/16/old-rivalries-keeping-turkey-on-sidelines-syria-fight-analysts-say/>.



mainstream Islam across the Arab world.³ As one of the most well-known journalists to cover the Syrian conflict consistently over the last six years, Patrick Cockburn, famously put it at the beginning of the crisis: “Western intervention in Syria would make matters worse”.⁴ Future strategic developments will tell us whether Cockburn’s prediction is true or false.

3 See Cordesman, Anthony, *Syria: The Search for the Least Bad Option*, CSIS Burke Chair in Strategy, 3 April 2013.

4 Cockburn, P. (2016) “Western Intervention in Syria would make Matters Worse”, 27 April 2011, in *The Independent*: Fisk, R., Cockburn, P. and K.Sengupta (2016) *History as It Happened: Syria: Descent into the Abyss* (Miami: Mango Media, The Independent), p.6.



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